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# American Contemporary

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## Short Stories by

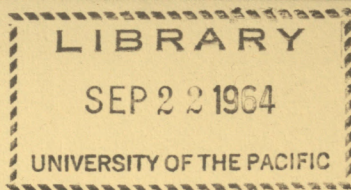
Introduction by Herbert Gold



# Contemporary

Curtis Zahn

New Directions — San Francisco Review



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# Introduction

"Experimental writing" is the name of an idiot category dear to the hearts of pen clubs and "creative writing" teachers in the downtown YMCA. "Experimental writing" usually means that the sentences are not sentences and the paragraphs are not printed square on the page. Curtis Zahn is not an experimental writer in the senses of tricky metaphors, evasive symbols, or private spelling; his prose style is steady and his intention is made clear—clear and yet resonant: he is a very good writer.

Still there are ways in which Zahn has merited the praise-blame word "experimental." His work has been published mainly in magazines of the very smallest circulation. The circle of Zahn addicts is not a large one. Why? He writes a prose of considerable suppleness and great wit; he speaks with a coherent and convincing voice, occasionally wavering with anxiety; he tells his strange and funny little allegorical anecdotes of Southern California and leaves an afterdream of unresolved feeling. And his stories are not stories. Perhaps this is what the word "experimental" means when applied to Curtis Zahn. His stories set forth a locale, a character, a point of view; they enter a fanciful new world and

offer a glimpse of resolution to the issues of a struggle; then they stop. That's all he gives. Reading a few pages of Zahn can be a frustrating experience. What the devil is he doing? Why does he cut us off so fast? Why does he settle for epigram and sour crack, undeveloped scene and sketched character? Why doesn't he give more?

He does.

Reading a group of Zahn's stories makes the intention clearer. He is not a story teller sitting down to tell stories, any more than an abstract expressionist painter is a painter standing at his easel to do flowers and faces. His is a voice and point of view which use the apparent form of the short story to write a signature across life. Beneath the apparently cool rationality of the style lies a jazzy sub-conversation within the sub-world of hot Southern California afternoons. The play and tension is one of style and rhetoric. There is a continuous bridge between the stories, linking them, the soliloquies of a mild, witty, sour relisher of life. It is not a merely private experience. Zahn shares the laugh. We overhear a murmured conversation of dissent and protest. The bomb has a silencer on it, and besides, it doesn't go off. The jokes go off. The pain and sympathy go off. The bomb lies among us, reader and writer, and writer and reader glance nervously at each other.

What is the news carried from hearing in this sub-conversation?

A man troubled by Conscience has the organ removed by a surgeon named Girlslain. A girl casually changes men, but thinks seriously about cars. Cars in these stories, true to the folkways of Southern California, play a large part in the fantasy; Cadillacs become 1934 Chevies in a flash, due to a withering look. Sex also seems to mean something else. Says a floating lady;

To me, it isn't cheating if both parties know about it and both do it with two others.

The idea of justice remains vague. A bill collector finds a be-reaved coot who pulls the world of installment buying down around his ears, accumulating refrigerators in the dusty yard, and

Persian rugs, and some old cars, naturally, and a dress, size 10. People have death certificates but no birth records.

Sometimes a story slides off toward science fiction, toward an Orwellian parody of the future. In SADCO, it turns out that "War is the greatest threat to Peace," and the intelligent computers therefore finally commit suicide. The satirical passion is modified, gray, amused, cool.

In "The Epicurean" a richly imagined disaster occurs. The Epicurean hero passes Esquire for style, pulls up on Town and Country. He is stylish and finicky beyond compare. Yet disaster and mortality overcome him, too. In the end, despite his fine palate, he becomes a man who cannot tell the difference between veal scallopini and chicken-fried steak.

In these stories men wait for years on their front porches for the musician's union to call for a mandolin player. Women wait to be mounted on the prow of boats after the rest of the gear is stowed aboard. Men and women slide continually through a hot, sundown world of exhausted sex and garrulous despair. Their thoughts come out of television and the papers. Their unrelinquished hopes poison them. "Tomorrow was her land of yesterday." A woman picks her men at random out of the telephone directory and calls them until one consents to meet her. College graduates hurry to look old enough to dress young again. It is a world of Hollywood studios and parking lots, tourists and missile factories, electronics doodlers and starlets.

Immersion in these stories results in creating some fresh doubts. It revives the old doubts. Curtis Zahn's style turns out to be more than an exercise in style. It tells along his strange road, the single story which lies above all the truncated ones in this book. Today had better learn to be our land of today. If not, we die. We die anyway. But our only chance for today is in the day.

Curtis Zahn—as to his biography—lives in Malibu, a beach town near Los Angeles. He was a conscientious objector during the war and spent a year under guard. He has been a painter, a Hollywood writer, a yachtsman, and an editor. He has been ac-





# Recognition

"Harry," I once said once when the sun was setting over Pomona, Cal, one of those days you could actual see, "Harry—do you ever go to work and sit down without a beer and try and think?" "Sure Nora," he answered. "But I mean real think."

"Isn't everybody once in awhile? Thinking—" He is immediately now suspicious. Becomes absolute interested in Playhouse 90 even though he doesn't go for highbrow. He looks as though I shouldn't look at him but watch the announcer plugging that new deodorant which does it five ways, four times faster. "Think what?" he asked suddenly.

About us.

What about us?

A body & fender man makes enough money allright so it isn't that. A body & fender man thinks and fux just like everybody else, probably more. But you wanted Harry to think about us, like, where are we? Where we going?

Charlie does. Think, that is. Charlie says a man can smell it coming, for a girl in shorts that is tanned is a kitten getting ready to show the claws, and Charlie knows men. That is why they're

bowling, or having one for the road at *Erny's*. Even outboard motorboats—men got to escape. From what? Well, just escape Charlie said. He once ran a bulldozer once (Charlie) but kidneys gave out. More later . . .

So I told Harry, who we happened to marry each other, "Exactly what you do down there at Pomona Body & Paint?"

Looks at you. As if crazy. Puts down can of Lucky, says, "I told you what I do down there. I beat Buiks." Buix? Iron the bumps out of fenders. "Sometimes I'm a solder man like I told you."

"Like your work?"

"Does anybody?" He is pleased with this unique approach. "Why, Nora?"

"Oh—just wondering."

"Why wondering?"

"Nothing. It just sudden occurred. What would you really like to do if you had your choice, Harry?"

"I'd like to hop over to Avalon, Catalina, and ogle at the tail. There's a honest answer for you."

"But there must be more than that you want."

"Sure. But I can't tell you the rest." Laughs but is grim and noisy. He is sitting in the big soft chair too big for his small size. Shoes off, showing his terrible ickey white feet and the newspapers scattered around him in a half circle, hemming him in.

But I better begin in the beginning.

Charlie said he wants to put expression in my eyes but Harry never even really looks, even. When we first move here I was born in Saint Louie and Harry Ohio but met in Kansas, Mo, because I was going with this fry cook but Harry had a Chevy convertible. He got married to me in Riverside, Cal, because there is this cousin that has an Olds. He pulled down a hundred a week greasing Pontiacs and likes hunting, this cousin. Especially jackrabbits. You go out on the plains only here it is called desert with a .22 and it is a lot of fun, even though not good to eat unless you're a foreigner. Anyway, that is how come we bought in Pomona, because of Harry's Riverside cousin.

I went to Lincoln High for a year but they moved west, my



folks to San Diego so switched. We used to go to the beach, even in winter but I never won any dancing contests. Just average. Harry didn't finish but he says he did. But we didn't have much else in common with Riverside except shooting, which is the main route down to Palm Springs where Tony Curtis goes.

What is there so hot about Pomona, not much.

There is this Consair Plant that hires like crazy, and L.A. is only forty miles if you get lonesome for jive. Three drive-in movies though. And malts out of the world. Smog and no snow but you can make it to Baldy quick only watch your anti-freeze if you stay all night. The Bowling Alleys are the biggest and best, every modern convenience. Anyhow, when he said Pomona I said, "Okay, Harry, if that's the way you feel about it." There still is a lot of chicken coops and cows but some day it will be a big modern town with white stucco and gig glass. So it isn't that. The town, I mean. The town's okay enough, it's the other thing.

He's not lazy. He's got a lot of sick days like everybody but when working is not the type that fux around. He would of been pulling down two seventy-three an hour except this old farmer ran into my rear when I stopped for a freight. Pomona is full—farmers and freight trains. He curled my right fender and slaughtered the chrome. I was late picking up Harry because Doctor Warner warned me we were pregnant, three months. Took my name and phone number as though it is a crime to pause for a freight. I couldn't stick my signal arm out because Harry got electric windows and they never work just when you want. But that is how Harry happened to work for Pomona Body & Fender because they pay three-o-nine per hour and you ought to see some of the totals they tow in and send away looking factory fresh but Harry, you couldn't give him one after seeing what they been through. They've had it.

"What do *you* do all day?" Harry asked, on this occasion when I wanted to know what he does over to Pomona Body.

Suspicion? That you might just be playing around. Like, women have nothing to do except sit home and watch the television. The truth—I miss half of every program all day because

of interruptions. Erna calling. Baby's formula (we have Joe now because he said if you have one, might as well two.) You clean house. Rearrange the deepfreeze so the tv dinners are ready each night of the week, clean house. Laundromat. I drive to the one on F Street because Jerry goes to that one and it takes time. Shopping, you save precious time with everything prepared including bake potatoes but what to do with all that cardboard keeps piling up? Mary and Sal come by for coffee and fix each other's hair. She has a crush on Tommy Sands, but just a kid. Mary still sticks up for Elvis, while I like Cary—he's such a real smooth gent. Grant. Sometimes we eat out. Harry likes a good steak, says it makes him feel like Tarzan. But always we fight about toothpicks. I don't like to see a man walk around with a toothpick sticking out. He says it's like pharts. Harry pharts, he has to but I don't. Charlie says it is like a skunk, like, a man protects himself by smelling. When he is angry. Harry has a lot of bad habits, belching louder than anyone, yet men think it's smart. To me it's only the street gangs do this. In Pomona there are gangs but they ride around in hot convertibles, cruising they call it.

One night we drove with the top down even though it blows my hair. Harry's too, for that matter.

Still, in July with a moon when you can see it through the overcast, you wonder if you aren't missing a lot. We each got a super-malt and then South Pacific. Don't see it, although John Kerr has it. Harry couldn't understand it, except the airplane scenes which he says weren't like that at all. He was in it for a year, the Korean. But you wonder if you aren't missing all of the fun. Everybody on the freeway is in such a hurry, millions of cars, everybody going some place. Where? Are they having a ball?

I think I first started to think when I met Charlie who goes with Christine. She's divorced, like everybody else with two kids and a hundred and fifty a month. One of our best friends, but is older, probably thirty something. Charlie is too but in age he looks not as old as Harry who is younger. Harry is starting to be bald and can't see to read, but he never did do much reading. Me either. Charlie lives in a funny old house but has a disposal.

But once we were out in his kitchen making some vodka drink that has vodka in it. Charlie was standing over the sink and pushed the button. He said, "I'd be willing to let everything go down the drain if you'd sleep with me Nora."

"Be careful," I warned him, "Harry don't like guys that fux around." But there were bones in it and you could hardly hear anyway, with the noise.

But it made you think—if Harry's best friend wants to do it, who wouldn't? (He installs antennas on Plymouths.) Of course when you're getting loaded everybody says anything. Still, he had gotten crazy about these foreign movies. (Charlie) He would drive fifty miles just to see one. When Harry got his yellow sports coat at Sears Charlie kidded him, but serious. "Harry—Sears is the betrayer of the middle class." Harry let it sink in but it didn't go very far. Charlie explained on. "Bad taste. Poor workmanship. Terrible design."

Harry gave a mighty tug on the cord of his Mercury outboard in the tub in our backyard.

"Pomona is a Sears-Roebuck culture. Everything about Pomona. Young mothers with unformed faces. Spoiled kids that either get pampered or pounded. Power lawnmowers, deep-freezes, barbecues. It's a trap. They get people. They entice them." Harry just looked at him, measuring how he could kayo him in a good right hook if he really wanted. Charlie said, "Sears is America, U.S.A." Harry said, "If you don't like it here in America why stay?" And gave the motor a tug. It started with a roar.

Once I said, "Charlie, do I have an unformed face?"

"Sure," he said. "It's attractive but could be beautiful."

How? By starting to think and feel things.

"But I feel."

"So does a snail if you touch him."

He had a kind face—tall and thin, yet was an oddball. He said people got to come alive. Most aren't nowadays, that's why they pamper themselves with thrills and new cars, movies or hi fi sets. So dull that they can't amuse themselves.

Well, but if you got the money to pay for it?



The ball game. Jalopy races. The Home Show. Trips to long places weekends. Hobbies. Sports. Labor-saving gadgets. These are wrong? But suppose Harry gets sick and all these payments come due?

Medical insurance. Social security.

Charlie shrugged. Hardly any shoulders. But lots of people can't make their payments. Everybody seduced. Buying what they can't afford. Other radical talk. He would drive fifty miles to see a foreign, yet wouldn't watch the Oscar awards on tv.

Christine went along sometimes (to the alien movies) and they had got chummy with a Negro pair that work in Consair because Christine herself was a foreigner, Swedish, although born in Milwaukee. We used to have fights over the race question. Harry wouldn't want his sister to marry a person of inferior complexion, even if he hadn't had a sister. Charlie said everybody is the same color underneath. Tests prove it. My own feeling is I don't care one way or the other except I wouldn't want them as friends. I don't mind their riding busses anyway since Harry lets me have the car, though that means getting up at six a.m. five days a week and driving him to work. His ride pool you can't depend. Always somebody is sick or goofing off. You never saw so many foreigners as Pomona, blacks and Mexicans and even oriental that drive around in fairly new cars the same as if white, even in restaurants. The funny thing is, the day we did it Charley had me convinced of practically everything. I was going to run over to Japan with him and live among un-Americans. All we needed was six hundred apiece and he would import cameras. We got high on a bottle of Sake he bought because Harry talked Christine into going Dutch to the Drag Races. It sounds sinister when you hear it but was only kidding around of course.

He said, "Christine, why don't *we* go—Nora's big bottom (it's actually small) gets tired sitting on the bleachers. And she hates sunlight."

"When you seen one, you seen them all," I said.

"Last time, nothing happened," Charlie agreed. Nobody killed, not even a Total.

"They clocked a modified Dodge at one twenty seven," Harry said, "is that nothing?"

Christine has her cool side. She tilted back her can and took a big swallow and said, "Are you asking me Harry because if you are I'd love it."

This is the way you start, joking but serious. Like once for kicks Charlie suggested he and me ride in the back seat while Christine and Harry in front on the way down for a thick malt. I knew Charlie was going to try for a free feel, which meant on the way home it was Harry's turn on the back seat with Christine but thought What The Hell, we're not actually going to *do* anything. But Harry kept turning the dial to rock & roll, and he knows I can't take rock & roll.

But getting back to the time Charlie did it.

He and me of course were supposed to go to a foreign movie while they were at the drag races. We did go to a foreign movie, but it was all in Italian. Even so I got to thinking about Anthony Quinn who is bigger than Harry and Charlie together although Charlie is taller and weighs less. But I also dug the other Italian actor who is English, since the real hero was a villain. The picture is called *La Strada*—real weepy, even though you can't understand it. Charlie cried. I comforted him and he comforted me. It was all about this motorcycle. They live on it because he's a strong man but I'd hate to think what Harry could do to him, beating fenders with a hand sledge all day long. Soft. Flabby. But sexy, like Tony Curtis, actually who is handsome. "What did you think of it Nora," he asked me and "well, it certainly made you think," I answered. About love and life, how sad, all these people running around in crazy jalopies and no registration, I mean refrigeration. "Still," he said, "they have a soul. They're artistic."

"And the girl was gone on home. Like my kid sister if she hadn't been in that three-way total in Georgia." My sis had this strangeness.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't know about your sister."

Charlie is gentle or thoughtful. He always claimed it was impossible to carry on a conversation with me because I ramble

and do not put the words together in the right places. He says you'd have to be a mind reader to guess my thoughts. He pulls over to the curb in front of Pete's where they have these fancy foreign liquors and it is Sake wine which although tastes bad, really does it. I told Harry, I mean Charlie about my Sis who liked to gather wounded birds. Charlie had it around my waste—his arm—but kept slipping down although I'm sure he wasn't conscious but I was when we went into the house. The first thing he did was pull the cork. Then handed me the glass while still crying over Sis, first time in years. And the real trouble was five thirty-five and no Harry nor Christine. They were supposed to come back from the drag races. For that matter, we got to thinking, how do you know they ever went. To the races? Charlie is pretty cosmopolitan about these, it was actually he that first realized this thought. I said, "You're crazy as a loon. Harry wouldn't cheat on me." He said, "Christine wouldn't cheat on me." I said, "I never cheated on Harry, not yet." He said, "What about the time Ray Anthony was playing in Pasadena?" I said, "What about it?" Because everybody was sitting out in somebody else's car with anybody else.

To me, it isn't cheating if both parties know about it and both do it with two others.

Harry warns one thing leads to another. A girl will, if thrown together long enough with somebody else. If the mood is right. If you're mad at your boyfriend. If feeling low. Even high. That is why I never stop in at a bar in the morning unless accompanied by Arleta. A man may be a creep and set you up to a drink but if it is morning watch out. Like Bessie says who is married to this insurance type or salesman. If the right time of the moon, she who has done it several times knows beforehand what will happen.

"Charlie darling don't it seem strange a girl like me making it with a person like your type?"

"Not at all. It's a Darwinian law. Survival of the fittest."

"Who is Darwinian?"

"Darwin." He gave almost a tired look. "Never mind. Let's just say opposites attract."



You don't like being an opposite if you happen to dig the person you're opposite of. I said, "You know I'm a Kook. And dumb and everything?"

"You're an animal. That counts."

And ran his sad eyes over me. It was like wonderful hands, different than Harry. You could hear the helicopter overhead delivering the Pomona mail. Some hotrodder barrelling down F Street, and thought of the walnuts and chickencoops where Charlie lives, even a cow next door. Then I knew it was love or what? "Why I don't love Harry," I screamed out loud, "I never loved Harry."

He was starting to do it.

"Charlie! I love you!"

Stops. Takes a sip. Couldn't keep eyes off my legs. For him, this was real. "No," he said, still sadly, "you don't love me. You don't love anybody, Nora, you love an idea—"

But I do! I do!

"No." Sadder than ever. "You love whoever loves you."

You could see it written over the wall in the moonlight while hearing Charlie tell it. Just kids getting married while still wet. "Unformed," he said. Like groping amoebas, just for kix. Or the snails, gliding along blindly. Oh, sure, the guy had to work and support. But nobody was dropping dead from giving too much of themselves. And besides sex, went bowling and watched tv and had a bust weekends. "And is that bad?" I said.

No. "Then why are you talking about it?" Just describing the scene, he said, funny, the way his eyes grew happy over his own joke. "But you must have a reason, saying it?" It's life, he says, but is it really living, Nora? All he wanted was to be an usher. In a foreign theater, get paid for seeing movies you dig. So why is he installing antennas?

"Better pay." He looked out the window as though it is raining. It wasn't. "Better pay and it doesn't hurt."

Hurt?

He meant, it hurts if you get paid to do something you don't believe in. Like, if he worked in a missile plant it would hurt. "But you got to eat, Charlie!" Right. So you install antennas.

"But body & fender don't hurt." No but Charlie was an antenna man, not body & fender.

"Would you always love me?"

"Yes. No. I don't know, Nora."

"But you do now."

"If you call it love." When two people open their eyes and recognize each other. Harry and I never recognized each other. It was interesting. Funny, picture me and Harry passing on the street and not knowing who each other were. "Someday, maybe you will," he told me. And then no more talk because we had started to do it . . .

Harry didn't give a damn really except the one fifty a month support. I moved in but Christine moved out so Bessie moved in to help share the rent. Harry comes over to see the kids but they don't recognize each other and he stalls around, trying to get his money's worth which sometimes I let him. But Charlie! He felt bad and moved up to Frisco. Quite a guy but don't believe in marriage. I don't know if I do either. None of the kids are making it anyhow, there's more to life than watching tv and changing diapers or outboards. What it is, I don't know. Like, I wouldn't Recognize if I did, yet, maybe.



# American Contemporary





# American Contemporary

The nearest neighbor is older, leaner—a taut, trapezoidal man with a lowered left shoulder. He lives halfway up the road; between the beginning and the end. But it was to the end I wanted to go. “Canyon people are different people,” he says, “hard-luck types.” This, from under a dehydrated oak, spitting into the honest dust. His head is placed upon him at an odd angle, so that he appears to be smelling the stars, or listening for the voices of angels. “The Elliotts are hard-luck types—”

But is there such a type?

“They’re the kind of people that back out their car and run over tricycles, turtles.”

There is a hard, white chill to the air; uncalifornian, and not very contemporary for May. Below, so far as one sees lies a dream-scheme for Grandma Moses—cute, gingery little houses, picket fences, steeply twisting roads, prim trees. Chickens, ducks, anchored goats. There are, also, horses that were motored there on low, easy payments. And actual men chopping actual firewood.

I say, “For example—for example—”

“Well, *take* the Elliotts.” The neighbor’s hands fumble with a

pipe, with props. He breaks the match into two. "Everybody's afraid to get involved with them—too costly. Some of it rubs off on you. Trouble—"

Costly. It was that which had brought me up there from town. I collect; you miss the fifth instalment and you're dead if I can help it. But it's costly; I had to drop from the twelfth floor to our basement, sign out car number 28 and then stop-and-go across town, until suddenly it was the Freeway where everything not glued down is sucked north. From there, 35 minutes of needle-reading until the canyon turnoff. Then more stop-and-go, and lastly, decreasing roads that climbed curvaceously to end in strewn backyards. One of them, sooner or later, would be that of Ed Elliott—bane of credit men, problem of sheriffs, dreaded by the county fire department, avoided by neighbors, prosecuted by merchants, shunned by doctors. . . .

"You a bill collector?" the trapezoidal neighbor asks, unnecessarily, I thought.

"Merely a little matter of \$33.78. Wish me luck."

I put the company car into compound low and squared off against the steepest, most furrowed incline of all.

"Better walk. The last car that tried—it's still there."

Afoot, roads become wider, safer, smoother. Gone is the illusion of impossibility; present are environments—birds, out-houses, livestock, burning leaves, rotting leaves. The screams and bellows of cars, toiling and cornering, come from below to taint the ear. There are lilac and sage, the aroma of newly cut wood. You go through a gate and get smelled by dogs; enemy or friendly? Dogs with expressive ears that straighten and lower with each word or movement; with tails quick to curl under and around, protectively. Dogs that either give orders or take them. Now a turkey—already half-plucked by various elements—tacks into the cold wind. A goat jumps from the garage to the roof; you note that the shingles will contain cracks capable of straining out nothing smaller than gravel. You start toward it all. The dogs—long since tired of biting creditors, cops and insurance investigators—collapse suddenly in the dust, to dream of bones. The house itself is a plain, glassy, contemporary job, but already



aged by what is called the "lived-in" look. The paint is prematurely grey; the largest window is, of course, cracked; the smallest, gone. All reachable surfaces are marked with crayon, grease, mud, lipstick. A dehydrated flower hangs by the door in a stone planter lacking most of its rocks. And now, through the breezeway, you descry an unexpectedly splendid collection of artifacts. Two refrigerators, doorless, lonely on the dirt, stand like Tweedledum and Tweedledee. A wheelless, late model Buick, a bottomless boat, one washing machine—still stuffed. Collapsed rabbit hutches, a Persian rug, two streamlined overstuffed chairs of a type still used by chrome-age man. There are snarled antennae, bent pipes, a cracked toilet out of which weeds have grown, seeded, and withered. And the kind of twisted tricycles that such people as the Elliotts would have.

I looked, now, for flattened turtles; none—but other objects had been impressed upon the hard clay; a license plate, several beer cans, glass, a pop gun, a doll, valves, a gingham dress, size ten.

It is at this time you will whistle.

Any old contemporary tune. Salesmen in an unauthorized place do it, before knocking confidently. Bill collectors invariably whistle, it is a mark of a trade where surprise holds no advantage; where the victim has been apprehended too often and has no place to hide; nothing to give. Whistling, then, you go through the breezeway, pass among and through four cats, past a screen door, horizontal, also welded down by weeds. Now you've come to the actual midden, the real archaeology of canyon people—the ravine, where everything wanted or unwanted is hurled, flung, pushed, pried, toppled, poured. It is rich ground; always there will be an aluminum coffee pot, and around it, garbage, trash, bits of plasterboard, broken bricks, bottles, newspapers, cardboard cartons, toys, heads or hooves of animals, torn blankets, tires, beercans, ashes, broken tile, broken bassinets, rabbit hutches.

"Anybody home?" It is the doubtful voice of a man come to collect. Yourself.

Sounds. Not unlike those of shoes making contact with a metal object. Words—a vocabulary which, until recent years, would be unprintable. And now, with a loud, official "Yeah?" an Elliott is

framed by the cracked window. Elliott is not trapezoidal; he is oval shaped, with a bear's power. He motions you to go around to the rear because, evidently, the front door isn't working. You do so, passing a skeletonized patio umbrella on tilting flagstones, now under a lowhung rosebush with thorns, and an aggressive mockingbird. There—beside a late model console type radio already peeled by sun and water is a glassless window. And inside, Elliott, whose 49 inch belt seems to cut him in half.

"It's about the payments on the deep freeze."

"Step inside," he says, "the doors aren't working today."

Today? Inside, Sears and Roebuck have been turned loose. Everything in the house, apparently, was purchased one hurried rainy afternoon between 4:30 and 5. The air is hung with grilled steak, gasoline, mildew, disinfectant, and perhaps dogs that will never learn. "Things have gotten out of hand," Elliott says agreeably, and pretends to seek out an unoccupied, useable chair. He eyes the sofa with honest doubt, then zones off one end. Naugahyde—burned, branded, cut, lanced, cracked—a modern history for amateurs.

You get out the credit books. They have little to say—one payment, back in July.

"It all started with the cat," Elliott says.

"The cat? *What* started?"

"Everything." Elliott waves his hand in a magnificent gesture of inclusion. But it catches the lamp off balance; the lamp falls. We both jump up. Then, slowly, Elliott sits down. I also sit down. The lamp lies there, its shade oval now, its Venus de Milo base, already armless, now legless; a basket case. I think of the trapezoidal neighbor; "The Elliotts are the kind of people who . . ."

"The fact that the cat got sick."

Ah, the cat!

Elliott studies a tinted photograph of a girl. A bride I think. "Why *should* it get sick? Cats don't get sick. Why should it happen to me?"

Things happen. The lamp, tricycles, animals, turtles—

"Maybe one in a thousand gets sick. I only got three—no, five now." He offers a *Salem* cigarette, badge of virtue for men up against bill collectors. His coat sleeve, I notice, is frayed. He notices that I notice. He says, "This is typical—paid 65 bucks for this suit. That is, I am *supposed* to."

You ask what happens with the suit.

"Somebody left the oven on too long."

This is an answer?

"It's supposed to have a thermostat, but it doesn't work." He kicks absently at Venus who cannot kick back. "I'm talking about the oven. The oven is related to what happened to my coat sleeve."

"Ah," I say.

"That was caused by a pan of water. It boiled over on one of the burners. Electric. Water ran all over the damn stove and got into the oven thermostat. Blooey!" He bangs his hand on an unseaworthy table, unexpectedly missing a pin cushion. "Thermostat hasn't worked since, and stove's only 8 months old."

This, you are to understand, explains it all. He begins to light his cigarette with a matchbook that has lost its cover, scratching away at the small corner of phosphorescent coating.

"You tear the covers off matchbooks, I see."

"Not usually. But there's a loose fit in one of the windows. If I wedge a piece of cardboard into it, it holds the window up." He glances at me doubtfully. "You got to have air—"

No argument. He proceeds to explain how a pot of boiling water ruined his new suit. Elementary. Reached under the hood of his Pontiac to jiggle some loose ignition wires. Sleeve touched battery acid. Being thrifty and virtuous, he immediately neutralized it with baking soda. Then, because he had to wear the coat to work, he put the wet sleeve into the oven. Turned low. But of course the thermostat—

"About the cat—" You adjust yourself among the holes in the sofa. One of them seems to contain a pair of missing scissors.

Elliott becomes philosophical. "As I see it, the cat was our turning point—"

"*Our?* You have a family."



"Yes. No. I'll get to that later." He pauses, listening reflectively to the goat moving sure-footed overhead. "It started in the middle of the night, year ago. In the middle of the night it started screaming. The cat. 'What shall we do!' Martha said. She's my wife. Was. 'Shoot it!' I told her, and meant it because I was beat. Had worked overtime. On way home ran out of gas because every damn station was closed up. You'd think—"

He pauses, seeing that my attention has become fascinated by the new hole his cigarette is making in the sofa arm. "Never any damn ashtrays!" he announces sadly and gets up, changing the lampshade from oval to flat; he returns with a plate whose surface is covered with egg, already in the pre-fossilized state. Apologizes; "water shortage—but I'll get to that later."

Later is all right with me. But where are we now?

"The cat. I would have shot it but no shells. We'd agreed to hide the ammo for the 12-gauge shotgun. Because: Only a week before, oldest boy got inquisitive. Blew hole through roof. Anyway, was so bushed, couldn't remember where we hid them. Shells. Wife wouldn't tell. Women are like that—you wouldn't want them any other way, actually."

You wait. You could hear, somewhere, a canyon dogfight.

"So she offered to drive it. Cat. To George Maston, in Stone Canyon. The vet. But then of course my car was down on the highway, out of gas. Three miles."

"You didn't have two cars in those days?"

"Didn't *need* two. Wife wasn't working."

"Wife wasn't working?"

"Didn't *need* to. That was before the fire—"

The fire, he promises, will come up again. But now is the time to talk about the veterinarian, the cat. The veterinarian, it seems, agreed to come to his house. But it was going to cost. Elliott allows thirty seconds for that to penetrate, then asks, "What would *you* have done?"

"I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't have a cat."

"Maybe that's a good answer. Anyway, he came over. But his Plymouth got stuck in our driveway. I should tell you there was a slow leak in the pipe ever since I hit the faucet the night little

Mary's tricycle was parked where I usually park. But *I* was always able to get in and out. *I* knew where it was soggy—"

The rest follows in logical order. They pushed and rocked the vet's car. Then, suddenly, with a lurch it ran straight into Elliott's front door, demolishing radiator and hood. Unfortunately, only a week before, Elliott had bypassed the main fuse box because some of the circuits were overloaded and kept blowing. The bumper cut the conduit. A fire started—

"As I say, the cat's what broke my back. The damage was four hundred dollars for the house. McWilliams sued for three hundred—"

"I thought the Vet's name was Masten."

"Right. But McWilliams was riding with him. Went clear through the kitchen."

Elliott scratched himself; low, and to the left. "Naturally I offered to pay for everything, but of course I didn't have the dough—just spent five hundred on the retaining wall. Leak in front yard was causing bank to slip over onto county road."

"You built the wall but didn't repair the leak?"

"Couldn't. I know! Sounds like fixing the leak in the dike with your li'l finger. Fact is, Martha and I had it right on the agenda. However"—he scratched some more—"we had to fix the wall first or the building inspector would start nosing around." Elliott stares. "You can't have that—"

No, I tell him. Please, not that.

"Because then he'd stumble onto the bathroom that ain't connected to the cesspool yet."

"It isn't?"

"*Nah*. No *cesspool*." He scratches some more. "Fleas—nothing to get worried about." Elliott gets up, trips on the lamp again, then rummages uselessly on a crowded, dish-stacked table. No matches. I hand him mine. But he doesn't need them now—out of cigarettes. I offer him mine. Accepts, then says, "No cesspool, no *skeptic* tank. Without a skeptic tank they'd have thrown the book!" His lips protrude at the word "book." He concludes this mysteriously by adding, "You'd never guess one damn cat could cause so damn much grief."



You conclude that some kinds of people simply don't belong in the 20th century—and that a lot of things will have to be un-invented before the world's safe . . .

"You probably want to know—" Elliott is stomping ants and smoking dangerously.

"Yes—what the cat has to do with a cesspool."

"Chlorox."

"Ah," I say, "Chlorox."

"You get it!" he exclaims, genuine admiration showing, and adds, "whole gallon. Ruins skeptic tanks, kills the beneficial bacteria." Lowers his voice. "And bacteria breaks down the solids which, frankly speaking are—"

I tell him to spare the details; I was raised in Kansas, never left home until my 21st birthday. I glance now at my watch; if it isn't running backwards, I have been trying for an hour to swing the cat. I clear my voice: I hear it say, "Regarding the instalments due on the cat—"

"I'm coming around to it. When Johnny knocked that bottle of Chlorox into the sink—"

"Who's Johnny?"

"He's the youngest. But he is chasing the cat who, of course, is on fire."

"—And Johnny was told to put the cat out!" This I tell him sarcastically, but all is lost on people like Elliott. The textbooks don't go down that far, you've got to improvise. Patiently, I ask after the fire.

"Curtains blew over the toaster."

"Close the window."

"No glass."

"Cat break it?" I sit tight, hating myself.

"Nah. Neighbor boy shot it out. In canyons you always got neighbors."

"The kind that back the turtle out of the garage and run over tricycles and cars?"

"What's that?" Elliott's eyes focus briefly, then attain normality.

"Neighbor boy. Sore because caught foot in gopher trap. Sure



it hurts. But he had no business trespassing on my property, even if it *was* true—”

He stops. You wait.

“Goat,” he says. “Boy claims my goat had his baseball. How can he tell? Chewed up. Might be anybody’s ball.”

I suggest goats would be penned. Elliott is still ahead of me. “*Was* penned, but I needed some wire in a hurry one day. Rear door of the Ford. You drive over to Ventura with a door flapping and they’ll give you a ticket. Care for a warm beer?”

You shake your head. You wonder, aloud, why he had to go to Ventura in a hurry. Because, he says, you got to eat. It is 42 miles, you announce. Nah—38, he says. Besides—nearest place. Nearest place to eat? Nearest place for *everything*. “We’ve had a little trouble with the local merchants,” he explains, “some disagreements about paying off bills. Besides—Ventura’s got more stores.”

The more stores, the less trouble for a longer time . . .

“What about the wire? The flapping door?”

“She was trying to tow the Pontiac—we had two cars then. Had to. We both worked together in different places.” He glances over to see if I’m keeping up. But I’m still in his Ford, headed for Ventura, hungry, and in a hurry—

“All right,” he says, “Pontiac out of gas. Leak in tank ever since Martha ran over rock because Peg started to fall out door and wasn’t looking where she was going.”

“I thought it was the *Ford* that had a bad door.”

“Bad *rear* door. Pontiac’s was the right *front* door. Brakes didn’t hold when I was getting out once. Jammed door. That,” he adds generously, “was *my* fault. I’m always careful to pull hard on the emergency but my hand was burned from that melted candle wax. Couldn’t pull.”

The candle? Nothing to it. Cissie (she’s the youngest) stuck her giraffe into the electric heater. Lights out. “Now,” I tell him, “we’ve come to the matter of the deep freeze.”

“Was going to call you about that—”

“No telephone, naturally.”

"Ran up long distance bills. Had to call lawyer back in Ohio. Phone company in a hurry. You'd think, with all that money they could wait—"

"You only owe us \$33.78," I tell him cheerily.

He sets his empty beer can gently between his feet. He fumbles in his pockets until I am overcome, then reluctantly accepts a cigarette. "You remember, like I was telling you how everything started with that damn cat?"

Memory is one thing bill collectors have got.

"Sure. Well, I mean it about the cat. When the Vet got his car stuck and the cops came and started that big fire—"

"The *cops* started it?"

"Damn right! Sure—the Vet's Plymouth cut the electric conduit, but we got that little fire out right off. It was the patrol car started the big one that got the roof. Leaking gas again—"

"Not again—"

"Yup. I lit a match to see if I got him. Blooey!"

"Got what?"

"That damn cat! I tell you, mister, I'd had it. Oddly enough, the bullet hit the patrol car's gas tank."

"But the bullets were hidden away—"

"Naw. The 12-gauge shells was hid. Not my .38 though. Well, after they let me out—" His voice trails.

"About the deep freeze," I plead.

Elliott shrugs roundly.

"Destroyed by fire?" I ask helpfully.

"Wasn't *touched*! It was out in the chicken coop the whole time."

"And the chicken coop—" You begin to perspire like the first runner on the last lap. "Where's the chicken coop?"

"Nah."

Elliott, although behind in payments, is still leading after all. "Nah—wife took it when she moved back to her old man's farm."

"The chicken coop!"

"The *freezer*, man. That was the only thing out of the whole damn tootin' mess she wanted." He shakes his head; actual sad-



ness at his moment of victory. The gravity of your predicament is breaking him all up.

Perhaps that is why.

Why, suddenly, you develop a longing for the sounds of fresh air; for birds, wood-choppers, indecisive roads, even Freeways. Gravely you shake hands with Elliott, doomed to remember a large, infantile grasp. You will also remember motherhood in an economy based upon adult delinquency, and the broken artifacts of twentieth-century incompetents. Outside now, grasses are greener, and you start downhill in a series of lighter-than-air leaps—purged of human disaster, relieved of \$33.78, and grateful to be in your own, dusty shoes.

The trapezoidal neighbor leans like a sinking hulk across the roadway. He tamps his pipe. But his nose still points to the skies, listening for telltale signs of maturity in a confounded environment. "Any luck?"

Any luck. *Luck?* The marvelous fortune of not being Ed Elliott? The rich rewards of having no cat? "Plenty of it!" you tell him, and it might be the only truth out of a long afternoon of improbables.





# Reactivated Man





# Reactivated Man

For the duration of that hushed, hesitant, ominous night they kept taking it apart and putting it back together again. A shy moon came and went undramatized on its sterile, white stage; the surf called to us monotonously above the murmuring of marsh birds in the great swamp. I remember that the shadows of my most intimate parts fell coarsely, hugely upon the yellow mud walls as the doctors worked—I wondered, even in my delirium, that there had been so much that was wrong. And I remember the voice of Alice Greene, everywhere in the low room. Often the candle hesitated and died as she passed close to steal its air, and the psychiatrists permitted themselves to fix each other with feverish glances . . .

"J.E.—I think we've got it this time, J.E."

"Yes, of course."

"Really I do. I really do think we have it."

None of these men trafficked in semantics. Theirs was a science devoid of sociology; they communicated in the odd, clinical language of the day, and their spokesman—Professor Girlslain—swung his Phi Beta Kappa key in ominous, counter-clock-

wise circles while he dwelt amidst statistics, chemistry, physics. The "it" referred to was, of course, the suspected source of my ailment—the Conscience. I had agreed to reward them exorbitantly if the thing could be removed. The operation was then illegal but we had arranged by prior agreement to meet in the old adobe hut thirty miles from town—a property run by a quiet old woman who'd been an anthologist. She understood my need and volunteered that she also would have undergone a similar operation were she younger.

"It is late now, too late. Besides, the thing really died in forty-two—the day my husband sold our thirty-eight Studebaker and reported for induction."

"He was killed in the war?"

"I held his coat for him. I urged him out of it and he never came to occupy it afterwards."

"Oh, crap," Alice Greene said.

"Forget the war," Girlslain said, "it's all over. Forget the war," he said.

I was wheeled through the narrow, low doorway and past the mud walls which flickered as the old woman stood to one side, smiling down, coming at me in a voice whose rasping tones oddly took the visual form of casket hinges.

"I believe that it can be done without surgery," Professor Girlslain insisted. "I confidently expect to rationalize the patient into amorality—a kind of sociological oblivion—"

"Oh, Doctor!" Alice Greene said with simulated admiration.

"Afterwards I—or rather, we—shall apply the Moral Justification." He fixed the widow Greene with a conditioned smile which, I felt, caused us all to feel unclean. "When the patient leaves this room he shall be capable of anything. I include murder."

The surf seemed to listen. Near the window, a mouse bolted from its hiding place just as an owl fell from the rafters, thus achieving extinction. A coyote cast its peculiar voice upon the airwaves and the world reached for the gun at its side.

"Murder?" Alice Greene asked.

"It is really nothing." Girlslain obviously was a man long bored by public response. "Of course—" he focused his eyes in a simulation of doubt, "of course, the patient may not wish to go this far. Perhaps he would be content with arson. Burglary—"

I said nothing. One does not go to the analyst with preconceived notions. One does not go to be cured of a headache, for one is apt to discover that there had been no head with which to ache. Rather, one presupposes the problem, one enters the church with hat clasped to the buttocks and is willing to light the candle or click the heel or recall, perhaps, his unscheduled, concealed thoughts when, as a boy, he entered the Men's Restroom in the town square.

"Have you got the money?"

No, I had remembered to forget the money.

"One does not forget," Girlslain said. I caught the flash of his gold key as he twirled it violently.

Doctor Sleeve repeated the phrase. The old woman lit another candle. In the yellow light the other doctor—his last name I never knew, a man they referred to as "Norm"—was playing with some object that resembled a yo-yo. And now Alice Greene warmed the motors of her altruism. She assured them that I had twenty thousand dollars in the banks. I had come to them of my own accord and was willing to pay. Above all, I was a creature of utmost integrity, my regard for the welfare of others was legend: I could not kill moths. Certainly they would get their money. She herself would see to it.

"And how do we know that we can trust you?"

"I don't know that you can, gentlemen."

The room suddenly rocked with crazy laughter which contaminated first Doctor Sleeve, then Girlslain and finally all of us. The candles flickered while we shook and shouted. An owl bounded clumsily from the rafters and thudded against a window pane, and two mice darted from the couch, paused mid-floor, then floated across the stones to become lost in the debris that choked the fireplace. From somewhere I thought I detected the tune of a Brahms concerto, played upon the harmonica and of course



badly. But now the surf came to us, reminding us of our task, confessing in its tortured tumbling that aggressions had been stored up for some time.

"Why do you ask us to perform the operation?"

I said, "Because I loathe high income taxes."

They passed this around among themselves. "Go ahead, then, have your little joke. You are the one who pays."

"The money is used for armaments. Armaments will be used for war. War will destroy me."

Alice Greene suddenly found herself unable to avoid greatness. "He is not a masochist. He doesn't like paying taxes for this end."

The doctor called Norm stopped his yo-yo in mid air. "And the operation—" Slowly the toy began to move downward.

"The operation will enable the patient to pay his taxes without the excruciating pain common to all over-active consciences." Alice said. "In short, he wishes to achieve amorality."

We had ridden bicycles from different environs to this farm with its tall, sterile blue eucalyptus trees. Each of us in his particular route must have passed vinestrangled fences that night and sent small animals from his wheels and pumped the more furiously over sandy ruts, wondering if the others would actually arrive. A maroon Rolls Royce had passed me about half-way and I wondered if the elderly lady in the rear had her Conscience removed. The chauffeur had saluted with a kindly, protective smile . . .

"Miss Greene—will you bring me the patient's behavior pattern?"

They were making it official. They would like to think that their interest in the girl was absurdly conditioned. They were unaware that she wrote Confession Stories and interviewed the celluloid great with astounding financial success; they knew only that she was designed along the graceful principle that femininity goes out here, and retires there; they agreed silently that when she walked, everything about her moved with a glad rhythm. It was a biological pleasure to call for the patient's chart. "The Behavior Pattern," Girlslain rationalized.

"He has no Pattern, Doctor."

The information fell hard upon the ears. I began to laugh, only to realize that my Sense of Humor had been clamped back so that it overlapped the Temper.

"He had a Pattern in 1945."

"It was removed, June, forty-six."

"The fools—didn't they replace it with anything?"

Alice laughed. "This man is a stylist. He invents his Pattern after the fact."

They stood about, swinging their keys and storing up resentments. The old lady, bored and impatient, seized a broom and began sweeping figurative owls out the door. I lay upon the couch under the weird umbrella of triumph while Girlslain stared at my Sense of Humor, now in a jar of alcohol on the mantel, and marvelled silently at its resemblance to the Biological Urge which had been carelessly left exposed. There'd seemed no reason to remove this so long as they were to sever the Conscience anyway. Furthermore, there existed a shortage of nylon safety pins—and Sleeve had neglected to sterilize his textbooks.

"Hydrometer working properly?"

"Properly, Doctor."

"And the spark plugs?"

"Filthy. Absolutely—"

With relief I realized that they were discussing Girlslain's car while they worked. Sleeve reached for his number seven knife and admitted that he was interested in the new Russian automobile. The other doctor believed that power steering sounded exciting . . .

Still, Girlslain hesitated. He moved slowly to the window and watched the pounding sea a quarter mile away across windswept dunes. Then, sliding his Phi Beta Kappa key into a rear pocket—presumably so that it would be unable to see what he was about to do—he turned on me with surprising vigor.

"Why did you quit a job that paid four hundred a month?"

"It was war work—"

"Ha!"

"He feels that unless everyone refuses to participate in war—"

The words were from widow Greene again, my interpreter.

"Ha!" Girlslain had raised a sly hand. "But *everybody* doesn't refuse. Hand me the torch, Miss Greene."

One seems to move horizontally in and out of worlds that ignore each other; time turns delicately, and begins to feel its way backwards into memory. And the listener stands still while archaeology marches past, throwing over its shoulder the exoskeletons of events that were good or evil or guilty or frightened or shameful or triumphant. The eye informs on the reclamatory gland, and the reclamatory suggests that one may smoke a cigarette, even though the lungs are temporarily in a glass case.

One is embarrassed riding the couch—in this instance an old horsehair with enormous black buttons, some of them chewed by mice; embarrassed at idleness while three men and a nurse and a girl work at renovation. There is the suspicion that the thought must cross these minds:

"Is this one really worth it? Were it not for the fact that he pays us—"

And one's own: "I don't really deserve all this attention, fellows . . ."

"Josh."

"I'm just an ordinary person who happens to be luckier . . ."

"Button it up, J.E."

"I have contacted the Subconscious, Doctor. . . ."

"Good. Give it a bath and then hang it by the fire—that's it—next to his Memory so we'll not forget . . ."

Suddenly one feels a bombing plane pass sightlessly in the sky, and wonders if the peculiar vibrations of its armed might will no longer start the Guilt Glands working. For soon these glands shall be in the jar upon the stone hearth.

"He had an over-enlarged Recall."

"They usually do." Doctor Sleeve pushed the needle. "Now do you believe in paying an income tax?"

"No."

He pushed farther. "Should America feed the world—"

"Definitely they—"



Girlslain short-circuited out the words with his scalpel. I felt something give. I suddenly felt . . .

"Now! What should be done with teachers who refuse to sign the Loyalty Oath?"

"Imprison them!" The voice was harsh; for a moment I could not claim it as my own.

Doctor Sleeve looked serene. "What about their families?"

"Let them starve."

"Hah! And do you still want to feed the world?"

"Do you think I'm insane?"

Professor Girlslain swung his key. "Gentlemen, I believe you will find the operation has been a success."

Daybreak had begun its reluctant move towards the adobe hut and the first birds, the first rabbits, materialized among the trees. Objects that were solid began to claim shadows, and these shadows grew strong and asserted themselves. The doctors shook hands with one another and thought of breakfast, waiting not impolitely for me to retire from their agenda. Girlslain himself gave me his hand, and in it was an envelope containing a bill for fourteen hundred and eighty-five dollars.

"Some of it's for labor, some for parts," Alice explained.

"But there is more left over than before you began."

"Watch your syntax," Professor Girlslain warned.

"There are the Guilt Complex and the Recall." I indicated the jars on the hearth. "And my Conscience. An entire Conscience intact. As good as new—"

The Doctors achieved simulated laughter. "And who nowadays is going to come to us for an installation job of that sort?"

"A drug on the market," Alice said thoughtfully, not quite certain what she meant.

"Fourteen hundred eighty-five bucks," Girlslain said, adding hurriedly, "dollars, that is, of course."

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Tomorrow is another day."

"Yes, tomorrow—it will have to be another day."

And I felt suddenly, dreadfully happy as I gave them my back

and closed a door on their protests and started towards the city, marvelling then at the new, eager feet upon which the liberated man moves. And when I came across the Roll Royce parked a quarter mile down the road I promptly stole it and drove the remainder of the trip.

I never went back for a check-up because of some instinctive fear that they might resort to violence. Professor Girlslain in particular seemed determined to get his money and when, months later even the police were unable to locate me, he turned up with inexplicable persistence. It was only a year later, in Palm Springs, California, that I convinced him of the futility of that persistence; he had approached me beside the Racquet Club pool—grim, harassed, and exuding a kind of unbecoming humility.

"I need the money badly."

"That is unfortunate—"

"You've got to admit that the operation was a success," he said.

"I pushed a man overboard in Atlantic City for seven dollars and twenty-five cents," I said.

"You've been spectacularly successful in real estate deals. Obviously, without the operation—"

"Obviously."

"Then why don't you pay me the money?"

"Why should I?"

I watched him turn dejectedly away, stop, and then, "Doesn't your Conscience . . ." But the question died in sudden laughter that seemed to roll upon us, a drenching, illuminated laughter that sang in our ears and floated upon the nearby pool. For we realized that the two of us were alone in the world now, and the part of me Girlslain had been trying futilely to reach was in the glass jar on the mantel in the old adobe hut by the sea.



# View from the Coast





# View from the Coast

Her eyes were failing stars that kept skimming other people's soup while the orchestra strafed old Rodgers & Hammerstein melodies; her eyes were of an owl, set apart from her face by wide disks of shadow, and they saw without thinking what other women dreamed. She had been put out to roost at a table for two in a coconut grove, foundering on her fifth straight Scotch, trying to put something into tomorrow so that yesterday wouldn't prove so meaningless. But the place? Got her. It was another IBM machine triumph, calculated to make the customers undecided whether it was the one they just left, or the one they hadn't gotten to yet. Or, in fact, any of the last dozen Los Angeles night clubs of the last few months. It was the month for ornate grillwork; for mauvely-dyed stucco ceilings with important holes in them. It was the month for female vocalists to sing with dirty, insinuating voices . . .

"Henry," she said, "flirt with me."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

It was the olive-and-martini voice of the Greek waterboy who



had hovered too close, and now longed to excuse himself into the anonymity of his second floor flat on the east side of town. Henry, she realized vaguely, was in Europe, selling military secrets to friendly dictators. She turned expressionless eyes toward the bandstand and decided that the horn player belonged on Main Street demonstrating a miraculous new kind of auto polish. She held him for a moment, then obliged the drummer. He was good; his pretensions of madness went on where truth left off—another Zombie whose brains had been shot out from under him, a man supposed to know about Fixes, Pads, Dikes, and every connotation of the word “Man.” She left him momentarily to go to bed with the male singer who had precisely the right proportions of cynicism and hope as he belted mundane words in a flat, talking-machine voice. She held his face in contempt, a countenance that told all with contrived bravado. A half hour at most. But *was* it the Most? She saw him behind the counter of a lumber company, involved in due-bills and burgeoning girls who would marry as quickly as possible. She moved him onto an aircraft carrier, in a lieutenant’s uniform, and liked him better. But he didn’t deserve it. She left him selling lawnmowers in the basement of Sears and then turned to her chop suey, an elaborate dish surrounded by gimmicks and accessories, constructed with a good deal of anti-oriental premise. The future lay in a fortune cookie containing a rancid cliché about love and travel. The present was five dollars per person, with a chance for celebrities. The past was her car, a 1951 Chevrolet coupe, already in the hands of a parking lot attendant who had been tipped by Henry Fonda, thanked by June Allison, and gone unrecognized by Zsa Zsa Gabor. The car was parked, the cat fed the last of the cottage cheese, the bedroom lamp lit, the covers turned back. There was nothing to do but wait for the bomb to drop. She thrust a forkful of panfried sprouts into her mouth, swallowed, and sent another Scotch down after it. “Henry,” she said quietly, “I’m ready to go back to the farm. Saddle up the MG.”

No one heard. She was absolutely the only person in the restaurant except for a hundred men and women now sinking below the decks of their tables, willing to drown noiselessly while the



band played the Tea-For-Two cha cha. She was a woman on a rented mattress, floating through men's lives while lonely grandmothers played Canasta. She was a thin sloop caught in a southwester with too much untried canvas, a girl to be gotten into and out of with impassioned words and murmured apologies, a cushioned bulwark against reality. Men protected her from mysterious objects plummeting from the sky; in return, she brewed late coffee laced with rum and stood behind them to watch baseball games. There was absolutely nobody again, Henry was vomiting in the lavatory where spoiled attendants ran whiskbrooms over men's intimate parts as they stood there, doing it. "No one heard," she complained, and into her ordinarily modulated voice came the sound of newspaper headlines. Poundage slipped from her shot-after figure, dogs came and sniffed, teen-age boys leered, giving her the built-up stare that was fashionable for the month of May. You came with a man named Mike but everybody called him Joe, and you left with a rich, half-spent paperbox tycoon who knew a little place. A place? Invariably, it turned out to be one you'd already visited—far up somebody's canyon on a one-way road, with a light burning and no guests. The next morning you were late to work, with a dead battery. Especially if you worked in a long, mysterious concrete structure on the east side of town that had something to do with missiles. The next morning was a dress rehearsal for yesterday, a time gone unnoticed by calendars, and not unlike the following night. But the world was there, here, everywhere. Trying to be, crying it off. Apologizing for creased fenders. Promising to try, try, try. . . .

"Henry—"

"Yeah." Pause. "*Yeah?*"

"Henry—remember when I used to walk in the woods and gather signed photographs of movie stars that hot summer, back there?"

"Yeah." Pause. "*Yeah—*"

It was untrue. Girls had no past, no recall. There wasn't anything for girls to remember, they had no girlhood. Boys enjoyed boyhood and they never forgot, never passed up an opportunity to rub it in. Boyhood—

"Girls are too busy looking forward to remember back. Forward. To womanhood."

This she was unable to hear. The band was playing the Tchaikovsky cha-cha, and Henry was Mike again, talking Texas real estate to a dear little old lady who thought she was in Birdland.

Everyone had come from nowhere, arrived here. They came hot, dusty and hungry for illusion, toiling up from the flatlands to the Beverly Hilton. They sent their cars to the laundry, had their tops lowered, their eyebrows raised. They checked in, polished their fingernails and demanded a pants-presser. And then, with pleats ironed and ashtrays empty, ice ordered, drinks poured, they joined the restless, endless parade up the Strip, exchanging license plates with other states and nations, finally to end with the beginning—the purchase of a guide map to the homes of the stars. Destiny waited nearby, coughing politely through smog. The finger of Mother came down from a forgotten, thunderstruck sky and found a passage in the Bible. The world liked what it found, shamefaced but defiant; the world lost it; the world finally gave it away free. But it stayed on, moving to cheaper living quarters off Hollywood Boulevard, an absolutely starless commercialization that swarmed with square, greying, slogging old women who trudged valiantly along with their dreams in their shopping bags. They had made a pact to die there, still clutching their maps, still hoping for an autograph.

Meanwhile you discovered chop suey. Chop suey grew up and wore sarongs, it moved into architecture thought out on IBM machines whose buttons had been set at South-Seas Contemporary. It waited there, surrounded by parking lot attendants who expected a dollar, who'd been insulted by Sinatra. There were watery soups, plagued with mysterious floating solids, thumbled by virile, hairless men who snapped their fingers for Cadillacs. There were college graduates hurrying to look old enough to dress young again and talking cautiously about baseball, hi-fi, politicians and war. They ate correctly, tipped correctly, laid her correctly; but always someone had gotten there first. She was



a semi-colon during someone else's period—a sexual accidental covered only by life insurance. But thick steaks kept coming back; rare, older, and more desperate. She stayed on, or under, fighting back against letterless years. There was nothing to report. No complaints, defeats, triumphs. Men with the husky voices of self-made money shot highheeled shoes under her and never made her walk. Beside them, she threw herself at the sea, frantic for a beachhead. It was all a part of some suicidal migration, Wheels spun restlessly, coming from as far away as Maine, night and day and noon. And now, imprisoned by thunderous breakers, they had gone about as far as they could go. They lay there, gasping and sighing, only to throw themselves into the water again. China called! Hawaii whispered! Tahiti beckoned! But they settled for oriental restaurants with Mexican chairs.

"You're not a particularly sympathetic type," he said. His fingers, hooked into his belt, gave him girth and authority.

"How can I be," she inquired, "sympathetic? All that women can do is explode the population. And all men do is destroy it."

"To each his own. The sexes complement each other. I need you and you need me."

Bleakness settled upon the land, plugging everyone's smiling yawns, shrouding the colors of purpose with excuse. Excuse? At the end of each avenue there lay, somewhere, a red traffic light. Cuteness crouched behind every tree and shrub, waiting to pounce upon you in the form of a steakhouse with branding irons, a crazy bar, a trick specialty shop. Mile after mile the scene was repeated; you took a long drive, only to find the end exactly the same as the beginning; the same cop writing another ticket for the same sullen delivery truck driver. She looked at Johnny who was really Bill or Joe. He, too, was a repetition. He had been at the last bar, would be at the next one, waiting. Waiting for a repetitious girl like herself. . . .

"Where do you work at?"

"Johnston Carter Company."

"What do they do?"

"Nothing."



"What do *you* do?"

"Nothing." She waved a match and squinted. "They make something for missiles or something."

"Well—at least you're earning your way—"

"Everybody earns their way, one way or another." She was giving him only her eyes now, flat and noncommittal. Expression had been drawn back, was resting in the subconscious. But he'd never know: the make-up job would carry on while animation hibernated. She was following fashion, and fashion went on ahead, confidently, never turning around to see if it were being followed. Women stamped out their personalities and became somebody else—protesting, ridiculing, but going along. If she tore off her face she could win; if she dared look like herself. But men feared women who looked unlike other women. A man would back his car out of the garage and never glance over his shoulder, once he had. Had it.

"What you think of the girl—the singer?" His large, soft, pen-grasping fingers clutched at her.

"Dirty."

"*Dirty?*"

"Dirty voice. Dirty songs. She's singing for pimply, stoop-shouldered boys who park their cars in drive-ins. Alone." She was telling it through teeth that gave up each syllable with reluctance. "Music for people who despise sex—either because they've had too much or not enough."

"Nobody can get aroused over a girl who's never aroused."

"You could. Maybe that's the only kind you *could* get worked up over."

He snapped his fingers. Taxis descended from everywhere. He was Max, in the only suit of its kind. Remove his pants and you had George, Mike, Bill. Unbutton his shirt and it was Ernest Hemingway or Norman Vincent Peale. Without shoes, theirs were city feet—white, ashamed, frightened and somewhat slimy; used only for going from elevators to automobiles; for apologetic, hat-in-hand departures from women's apartments on Gower Street. He was a serial, coming on in vulgar instalments. From time to time he bit clear through an expensive word, made change, and

gave the listener what he decided was his money's worth. He took her to the La Cienega Boulevard galleries to watch the freaks stand around, not looking at the crazy paintings. This was culture, borne on the wheels of dirty, old, cheap automobiles to forge a snobbery that was puncture-proof. The moon cast its cold light upon feet such as his, twitching under a thousand blankets while their owners snored into the breasts of women they wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't marry. Wheels rolled outside under a sky ruined by clinging jets, by its cloak of grits and poisons. "I am *today*," she said finally; "is it really so bad to be a part of it all?"

No one was listening. On stage, a keyboard stunt-man with leftist tendencies was making all the wrong musical clichés, backed by the sheer brass of undeclared horns. Who could hear? Her father, perhaps. A man old enough to be her lover, his ears alerted for the smirks of pre-dawn chickens. He was the Midwest, buttressed against the night by a TV set that exclaimed the West. His tomorrows were all alike, designed and built yesterday. Her father had never found time to turn over and think. His back was as straight and broad as thoughtlessness. . . .

She stood up; a hundred eyes challenged her inscrutable expression. She moved her face like a radar screen, picking up the sounds and glances of the members of the band, and now the Men's Room was sending to her. But nothing came. Only Mike, George, Bill and Joe. She moved uncertainly among the petrified coconut palms, past the head waiter whose eyes avoided hers with grave doubts of recollection. She was an almost but not quite. She let herself out onto the parking lot, and now it was Eddie, the attendant who was a man but would always be called a boy. He accepted her validated ticket with a routine glance from head to ankles. He was the kind that made her feel fully clothed. He said, "Fifty-one Chevy. Right?"

She nodded, reaching into her purse to find a word that would knife boredom. Her fingers encountered two lipsticks, a coin purse, eyeshade, and a diamond ring given her by one of the most widely advertised jewelers on the coast. Farther down—in the absolute subconscious of women's bags—were combs, chew-

ing gum, miltowns, and menus with men's official telephone numbers. Beneath that stratum lay the past; last week's unpublished fun, awaiting an analyst whose consciousness nibbled away at his underthings.

She watched Eddie walk rapidly away, feet apart, as though delivering roses to Elizabeth Taylor. Something had pushed him out of the family plot in Nebraska, started him west to follow the splattered chrome of other refugees. He'd found his way by following the hot scents of movie theaters, town to town, getting closer and closer to the heady, factory-fresh aromas until the Pacific cooled his ache and threw him back upon the shores of the Sunset Strip, where he lay gasping at celebrities. She thought, "Undoubtedly, he touched somebody famous when they were drunk. He sleeps with a different mask each night because his dream is less real than celluloid, itself." It was a sharp calculation on a cold night. Summer fell into its kingsized bed at eleven; by midnight it was grabbing all the covers it could get. Biology had never come west, it remained on the hot, dusty, moonlit plains of Nebraska, it stalked the Catskill jungles and had twins without license. Sex was a fourth floor rooftop in Brooklyn, the product of honest, throbbing humiliation. But it had never come to California. It wasn't needed here. . . .

"Fifty-one Chevy. Right?"

She was fully paid for, recently Simonized, carburetor boiled, linkage adjusted. She could still stop suddenly if she had to, wanted to. But others ran into her rear, apologized, and handed her their Diners' Club cards. It was unwise to brake too suddenly when you were going too fast . . .

"How'd you like the show?" Eddie asked. His outstretched hand calibrated a nickel and two dimes; he could forgive her everything except the paint job—black, with white sidewalls.

"The show—?"

"The new singer." He peeled a stick of gum and ran out his tongue so he wouldn't have to put his fingers in his mouth. Chewing gum was good for certain businesses, his business—chewing gum, a pencil on the left ear, whistling. Whistling new, frenetic, tuneless, dirty songs; moving fast, talking rapidly. *Hustling*.



Hustling put you ahead, even though you had gone as far as you could go without getting your feet wet.

She looked at him to see herself for size. She was common-placedly attractive, with larger eyes, better features, but not class. She was the pedestal upon which glamor was erected, a woman destined to outnumber the Goddesses ten thousand to one. They propped themselves up with women like herself. Nobody would ever tell great lies about her beauty unless. Unless? Unless. She would never ignite a cult, a fad, a style, a type. Unless . . .

"The singer?" she asked. "Which one?"

"Marvin Menlo. He's another Bobby Ardmore." Eddie's roving eyes caught and dismissed two Cadillacs and a Thunderbird as they turned in. "The guy's really big."

She said, "You haven't seen a man named Mike, have you?"

His tongue came out. Remarkably, the flat rectangle of gum lay there, intact. Now he rolled it back and shook his head. Her time had come. Besides, there was only one Mike, and he was of course dead. She got inside the car. She was Texas without oil in Hollywood, outranked by starlets and models, but pushing men's honesty up a notch, propping their collapse with calculated femininity. Or was it? Femininity. She was destined to wash her own underthings on Sunday whereas others simply threw them away. She was mother without children, except at night. She listened to men's cries as they twitched through headlines, phony deals, missiles. Men paused dead-center in the middle of their fifth drink and permitted their eyes to tell a wide lie about discovery. But none of them was secure enough to fall in love with her. She refused to exist after four A.M.

Eddie needed a good stiff fifth drink. He was malingering, unsure what class the evening's close might bring. He might be overlooking a good lay, and there was nothing to drum his nervous fingers against except the muted canvas top of her Chevy. His feet chafed against asphalt, but his brakes would hold until another Cadillac pulled in. With the real stuff. She said, "The singer was okay but I don't think he'll ever be bigger than Bobby Ardmore—whoever that is."

She was halfway out of the parking lot when she realized she had forgotten her name and age. Quite plainly, she could see these things lying on the daintily soiled tablecloth under her napkin, between the chop suey and pineapple pork spare-ribs. Somebody would pick them up for her and call. Late in the afternoon. But she would be filing and sorting sheets of nonsense on the second floor of the factory where they made it. She thought of Russia, and was within a few seconds in Cuba. There had been a heavy, stooped man with a beard three tables away on the other side of the coconuts, and he had looked sad as he received the check. There were people like him, like herself, all over the world just now and it was only twelve-thirty A.M. They would all come to the Coast after all. And when they did, Eddie would park them, at the same time trying to calculate whether or not they were worth a new stick of chewing gum. Joan of Arc wouldn't make it; she was a woman destined to go on buying packages the rest of her life, married to a man whose waistline would match growth with his profits.

She tried out her new brakes for a sports car which darted up the driveway in a quick, skidding curve. It was the closest she would ever come to Frank Sinatra without his knowing it. If they did ever meet, it would be in the Congo or Arabia, and she would be under the care of Mike or Bill, unless Joe or Jim got sent over to sell bongo drums. She headed down the Strip, pointed straight for nowhere. There was no need to hurry; once you'd made it to the Coast you'd gone as far as you could go. There was nothing to do but work and sleep and drink and wait for the rest of the United States to catch up. And when it did, the world itself would follow—peopled with South Americans who looked like Jim, Greeks who resembled Jack or John, Egyptians who had become Joe or George. The world would be older, but she wasn't getting any younger because everything was too new, temporary, transient; tomorrow was her land of yesterday.

# Portrait of Girl Unconditioned





# Portrait of Girl Unconditioned

Wearily, she thought of him as a member of her accumulated men. Like the others—fouled from the oilspray of Sunday's lawnmowers, his instep stung by footballs, his vest rubbed raw for gravy stains. A man among her men, dialed tollfree at GRanite 3-4434 on a night when neighborhood dogs talked with the moon over their fences, and heavy, married people fanned themselves on the hot porches.

Three, four, close the door. . . .

"He's all part of some hidden plan," they had told her, "bold, obscure—at times without a sense of direction. A good bet for Thursdays—"

"And filtered cigarettes?"

She recalled the exact tone of the question, asked sideways through furled lips while a flock of cormorants settled dismally upon the lake. It had rained indistinctly through the telephone's mouthpiece, and an odor of pinesmudged chimneys filled the

valley, reminding her of the expensive smog she had experienced driving slowly down La Cienega Boulevard during her visit out in Los Angeles, California. That had been John F. Waggoner. And remembering John, she had unbuttoned the heavy red plaid lumberjack of Bill Smith, her escort, and found a city man. She had asked cynically, "Filtered cigarettes?" and Smith became a man who had known and ridden bicycles down long, lonely corridors while the masses walked. Once, during a vicious argument with herself she had denied insanity. It was only that her mind crouched low and then jumped. Other women had to imagine men; she encountered them in telephone directories. Other women shrank and waited, or they took too many baths, or drove their cars too far, too fast. It was as though they seized retractable pens and wrote their own epitaphs upon the shaded, intimate walls of mattress factories.

And then, she remembered, because Bill Smith spoke only Italian they had gone to bed.

"Who is all part of the hidden plan?"

Young fellows fouled by the oilspray of their Sunday lawnmowers? She had dialed Young, Frank E., and gotten a very old man. They had met in front of the Omaha public library and at first she thought that he was his own father.

"Whatever happened to Anderson, George M?" They wanted to know, oh, they all, always wanted to know.

"He?" she'd demanded incredulously. "Him?"

"Who else, lady—"

Wouldn't they like to know, oh, wouldn't they! Like to know—

Aloud she said to Thomas, Lieutenant Richard D., "I'll tell you. He's got dirty sparkplugs." Gently she placed her fingers on the clutching area of the lieutenant's sleeve. "No, I've seen them. I had his Pontiac greased. The service station boy told me. His name was Parker, Eddie F.—"

She remembered she had bitten her lip as she added the last. It seemed unkind, cruel—well, feminine.

The cormorants had fanned out on the lake and gone to work, swimming rapidly, diving and surfacing and swimming and then diving. They were like vacuum cleaner salesmen she had known,



men who worked as a crew and were deposited in a neighborhood through which they worked like locusts, gutting housewives' pocketbooks and pushing hot fur coats on the side. "They got to eat," she reminded her inner self, "even cormorants. Even if it's fish." And then, because a new rain squall ripped at the surface of the lake, she gave the birds her back. The naval officer would know what to do in a storm. Without removing his immaculate white gloves he could bring a ship in, fire a gun, launch a plane, start a war.

"Lieutenant Thomas—"

"At your service."

"Lieutenant—what in hell are you doing way up here on Lake Cuyamaca standing in this cabin with your hands clasped behind you? What are you holding in your hands—love?"

He had richly blushed and said, "Why, I came to see you, Paula—"

"But you don't know. You don't know everything."

Brightly now he said, "I know I love you."

He had been a member of her accumulated men, then, arriving in a taxi with a fifth of Scotch and golf clubs. His ship lay helpless in Norfolk, its men lost and uncertain without their officer. It had been as though war itself must stand aside while she made up her mind to say Yes or No. And then Bill Smith had arrived drearily on his motorcycle, mud-splattered and dressed like an ogre, triumphantly bearing a quart of red wine. He had looked up at the Lieutenant and said, "Jesus—how tall can they get?" and gone straight to the small kitchen and filled three jelly glasses with wine.

"Ed's in the outboard motor department at Sears."

This she had exclaimed in dubious triumph. Lt. Thomas had removed his Annapolis ring and placed it in a pocket where it would be safe. And Bill Smith, in the center of a small lake he'd built around him before the fire, was starting to strip. He removed his dark goggles. The black, pencil line moustache without this accessory was a fraudulent failure because—as the Lieutenant later observed—Bill's face looked like an owl's, and owls didn't have moustaches.

"Good men are hard to find," she announced to no one in particular.

"Jesus, Paula! It's a big night for frog hunting." He raised his voice in order to reach the altitude at which he placed the Lieutenant. "Jesus, Commander, ever do any old frog hunting?"

"Sure."

"You did? Jesus Christ, you did?"

The Lieutenant's answer, she later realized, had stunned her more than it had Bill, because Bill didn't draw lines around people, no, he treated everybody the same, why he would ask Jimmy Durante and Queen Elizabeth the same thing, whereas she, Paula, had a feeling that she was going to collapse.

"Sure. I was raised in Kansas."

My God, she thought, they all are, every damn one you meet on the ocean was raised in Kansas. Aloud she said to the Lieutenant who was grimacing over his wine, "Well, why don't you two farm boys get going? What are you waiting for? If it were me I'd try the east fork because my uncle George used to do pretty good there and as far as I know nobody ever tries it any more because what with the road and everything—"

"How's about it Commander?"

"Sure. Why not? If Paula doesn't mind staying alone."

When they had gone she poured herself a quick, hard Scotch and curled up in the chair near the fire with the telephone directory. It was still a favored thing for inclement nights, running over the names of her accumulated men, discovering new ones or at any rate names she'd forgotten. She opened the directory to the Q section, recalling once again she'd never had a man who began with Q. Nor X, either, for that matter. They would be almost to the lower east fork now, Bill and the Lieutenant, two of her accumulated men. Others would be flying planes, driving bulldozers, pressing buttons in factories, selling shoes. A whole platoon was climbing a remote icecap somewhere in Alaska; somewhere in France, an unhappy man was reading a book in a sidewalk cafe. Another—in South America—paddled a canoe among alligators. All of them she had accumulated, and then turned loose . . .

She picked up the telephone and dialed the number of Quarles,

Arthur H. She waited, listening to the lonesome sound of the ringing, and the clang of rain falling from the gutters onto the almost empty gas tank of Bill's motorcycle. She remembered a Charles Warburton she had dialed one hot August night. He had come right over on a horse that had won the Kentucky Derby and before long he was pitching fire insurance at her. Deliberately, she had led him on. Afterwards she gave him the telephone number of Marcel Gugiotta, the man who owned the cabin and was allegedly shark fishing in Mexico now.

"He must be out," she told herself finally, "Art Quarles."

Why was he out?

There had been four Arthurs, but only one of them had been out when she telephoned.

Chief Petty Officer Arthur Olney had slipped in his shower in Alaska and couldn't do much more than sit around in front of TV with a quart of beer. Arthur MacArthur nibbled around on the lower edges of slum real estate; she had literally floored him in an unfurnished apartment on the left side of town while his wife was upstairs, beating down an upholsterer. MacArthur had sent her home in his personal Ford, and later he'd gotten to hanging around—a face in the crowd, thin, muscular, sad, and bald as Yul Brynner.

She decided to hang up and try Quartley, D. F.

She poured wine into her waning Scotch and dialed the number. Almost immediately a voice answered and it was a man—authoritative, brisk, loaded with hormones and shaving apparatus. She said, "D. F.? This is Paula—"

"Okay Paula—" The voice waited.

"It's raining up here."

"Where? I don't know where you're at."

"Where I *am*." She laughed. And then, introducing petulance, she added, "They've gone frog hunting and left me all alone with a roaring fire and a half of a fifth of Scotch and it's raining—"

"Oh? Who's they?"

"My accumulated men. All twenty-five of them—"

She was aware that D. F. Quartley had hung up. Her words were being wasted upon the callous ears of telephone operators. The thought recalled an old resolution to have a recording made



of her voice so that every precious tremor would be saved, a record she would play over the telephone whenever the curious urge was upon her. Bill had offered to make a recording. He knew a fellow at work who knew electricals. Bill was probably being pumped dry by Lieutenant Thomas this very moment in the mud. "What kind of a girl is she, Paula?" Thomas would ask, curious.

"Oh, Paula's okay you don't have to worry about that."

"Oh, sure, I know that. I didn't mean to say—"

"Paula's real okay. She's got a lot a friends."

"I knew a girl in Okinawa," the Lieutenant probably would say. She could see him, dignified, in the lamplight in the swamp. A fellow anybody would hire to wear a collar on billboards along the highways.

"There was a babe in Ohio," Bill would confide.

The Lieutenant would go on, firm and polite, "This girl in Okinawa was like one I had up the Hudson River."

"Sure, they're all alike. Even Portland, Oregon." Bill would father the Lieutenant all over the place, up and down rocks, into the poison oak, because sure, he'd been there. He would probably describe some of her friends—the bicyclist who did forty-three pushups three times a day, the clerk from the greeting-card store who drove a Jaguar, the professor who taught *jai-alai* to rich boys on Long Island. He would inform the Lieutenant how she got tanked on dago red wine and rode his motorcycle bareback around the Harvard football field one snowy night. Wouldn't he? Natch. Natch, he would, Bill was honest, not a man to hold back, and he liked to tell. He liked to tell—

Three, four, close the door.

All of them, her accumulated men, had gravy stains if you looked.

Dirty sparkplugs. Careless about changing their oil. Yet she had never, really, known a man who owned a power lawnmower. You read about them, you saw the ads, you were absolutely guaranteed that everybody had one, no matter how little grass. Therefore, she was still young, alive, curious. She dialed the number and said, "This is Paula. It's still raining and the cormorants are somewhere out there in the dark goofing off. Is this Mr. Quartley?"







# Sadco

Should I turn to glance back I would remember chiefly the exterior, its quiet sweep of flagstone that gave way to stainless-steel gothic arches. A façade of glass, chrome, and volcanic rock separated from Essex Boulevard by geometric plots of dichondra and flowers forever in bloom. Remembering glass, you recall its architecture—the contemporary one-story octagon with its sliding lead and concrete panels. And rising from its center the flagpole of thin steel tubing crisscrossed with struts, tapering off to nothing at both ends. And I must not forget those associates who shared the curious joys and tribulations of SADC. SADC, itself, I shall discuss candidly, but in recollection, Dr. Junior Feasel comes through the most clearly—a man serene, integrated, and gifted with those wonderful expressionless eyes all of us strove to emulate. Dr. Feasel could hold his own with any machine in the building; despite his age, his fingers danced over the buttons and keys with the virtuosity of a Master. Feasel was totally without symptoms of anger, hate, love. It is said that his body temperature was at all times 3.4 degrees below normal.

I do not know. Certainly his office was kept at 58, and he wore no underclothes.

If you remember Feasel, you cannot forget H. J. K. Bagby. Bagby I picture bent stiffly over the watercooler in the Peace Lab. Bagby had developed a drinking-cup phobia—the result, I suppose, of too much paper work on the Venezuelan Obliteration Problem. Bagby! Outwardly soft and corpulent, yet, inside, all mathematics. Bagby and Paula Reiber are the faceless names that come to you in the night, asking punishment. Both suffered from feelings of “unworthiness.” Each concealed overt manifestations of Group Pride. They had failed their destiny; had proven unworthy of SADC. Bagby, Paula Reiber, General Horn, Professor Reek. All felt, at one time or another, inadequate to the challenge. Reek, for example, spent a pleasant autumn working with me on radioactive contamination. He had just been put in charge of the Pacific Ocean; I was experimenting with mutations, trying to breed a population of mental drones for the Chinese Problem. We developed a Relationship for awhile. Then Reek’s IBM-built Obliterator began to show resentment. At first it over-compensated. Later, it turned out emotional answers which became outright lies. Finally, in a completely schizoid burst, it under-over-compensated, blowing up the Marshall Islands on paper and causing us considerable embarrassment. But this is getting ahead of my story.

Paula Reiber used to describe herself as “strictly a present-tense type—no past, no future.” The latter prophecy, regrettably, proved correct. The former, also, we believe to be true; her relatives and friends were gassed during World War Two; she married a Chinese multimillionaire at the age of eleven. The “eleven,” itself, is an educated guess, since Paula is still legally dead in Budapest. She enjoyed telling new personnel that her merciless objectivity was made possible because she had no worldly ties. “Funny thing,” she would say, in her low, animal voice, “I have a Death Certificate but no Birth Record.”

You remember her excellent paper, titled—*Some Instances of Bone Decay Resultant from Induced Chemical Bacteria in the Pakistan Problem*. I remember that frankly masculine face, the



imprisoned contempt for all members of either sex, and her thin, supple fingers which exploded over the push-buttons when a machine problem arose. Her trousers were always creased, her necktie severely knotted, her watch-fob twirling from a vest pocket when she moved. She had been successfully purged of the common emotions. There is no place for love or hate at SADCO. Problems of the universe are hardly to be solved through spontaneous acts. "Morality and immorality," Feasel points out, "are the twins of failure—born in bondage to the parents of misery." A motto on the wall in Professor Reek's office puts it less delicately; **We Don't Want Men Who Kill For Now. Give Us Men Able To Kill For Tomorrow.**

Yet, as I have suggested, one keeps getting tomorrow mixed up with today, because today, of course, at SADCO, *is* tomorrow.

Perhaps this is why I am confounded by memories of Paula Reiber—the way she had of sensuously licking postage stamps—her practice of feeding problems to her Calibrators, removing the answers, then crumpling them before beginning to read. Once, she set fire to South Africa, won a hundred percent casualty answer, then proceeded calmly to burn the pages with her lighter. I remember that H. J. K. Bagley asked her why.

"Why not! The machines and I can repeat any time we wish!"

I should explain here and now that such is not the case. SADCO stands for **SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES to DEFENSE COORDINATION, ORIENTED**. We are—to be absolutely forthright—dedicated to the problems of global destruction and, if necessary, the destruction of the entire universe. Because we have been entrusted with the defense of a Free World against the enslaved one, we are personally to be held in account for the future of every known living thing. It is a heavy responsibility, a glorious challenge to the imagination. And *what* of that future? Again I should like to quote Feasel who says on pages 2,187 and 2,188, "We do not know what forms the Afterlife shall take. But we do know that the price of life always has been, and always will be, death." Liberty comes high; an apathetic citizenry—never truly weaned from the soft indulgences of personal ego—is unable to



see the forests of bondage for the tree of sacrifice. Few would give their lives unless prodded. But (again) as Feasel points out, "We do not really have a birthright; we did not ask to be born. How, then, can we demand the right to live!" SADCO is that instrument of determinism which charts the where, how, why and when of survival; we know precisely how long it will take how many missiles to go how far and kill how many. We also know how many will come here from where, when, and kill how many, so many seconds later.

"But isn't there a similarity between the work you do at SADCO and what they are doing over at RAND corporation?"

It is a familiar question, usually put by journalists or television interviewers. Today, many Americans have heard that RAND is the "think factory" for the Pentagon. SADCO, however, is the brains for RAND. They come to us, hats in hand, briefcases bulging with loose ends, and we commence where they have left off. As Feasel states in the prologue of his remarkable book, ". . . so long as machines permit men to do their thinking for them, machines will be only as good as, or as bad as, men."

I think this may explain where RAND fails and we succeed; granted—the former's strategists have discovered admirable formulae for global obliteration, induced diseases, and mass suicide—man's solutions to man's problems. But I don't think I need to point out that there exists no room for the Human Equation in modern warfare. As Paula Reiber observed, RAND types try a little too hard to relate to the Group, the Whole. Most of them have been through the Universities, and this, in itself (coming during the impressionable years of youth) leaves them with environmental conditioning to be overcome. Again, RAND people tend to pride themselves on "balance" and dabble in the arts, sciences, and humanities. Many of them are married to persons of the opposite sex; not a few have children or relatives. Also (and I must say this candidly) RAND employees are to be found dining in public places, driving cars, watching television or movies during leisure moments, and even engaging in lectures, debates or panel discussions. There is no room for discussion in a world impaled by the talons of socialistic zealots. As Feasel laments, "Discus-

sion is the vacuum into which we pour the energies meant for personal sacrifice."

Approximately one thousand of us live and work here at SADC0 in an anonymity of both body and soul. None is permitted "contact" with the outside world except through Termination. As Feasel has said, "The physical body may leave SADC0 when its obligation to society has been fulfilled, but the brain remains with us for all time." The proportion of males and females here is believed to be about equal, though I am happy to state that it becomes difficult to tell after awhile. Often I am asked by persons with a sincere desire to dedicate themselves to world betterment, "How does one go about getting hired by SADC0?" You are, of course, Appointed. As Brainard once said, rather facetiously, "Many are Culled but few are Chosen." This is true; of, say, a hundred Appointees, 47% will fail Orientation. Another 38% will fail because of normal emotional responses. The largest group (54%) is Terminated because of prior religious or moral inhibitions. Orientation is a trying and psychologically complex ordeal. The applicant is often unprepared for the realities of Hard War, or Soft (or Wet) Warfare. Insanity and suicide are not uncommon. Nor, even, is murder—although homicides are given second chances and, not altogether surprisingly, often prove suited for our tasks here.

Those Chosen are sent directly to Quarantine where they are stripped of all personal possessions which might remind them of the outside environment. They are issued regulation garments—similar to men's business suits except that they have neither pockets nor buttons. Later these accessories will be restored, for there is no discrimination at SADC0 and very little segregation. At table, one may sit wherever one pleases provided wise judgment is exercised. Meals are simple and are eaten in silence except on those occasions when Dr. Feasel chooses to say a few words. There are neither pleasures nor recreation at SADC0. It is best this way. Were one to remember or anticipate joy, then one might yearn to exist. As Feasel logically puts it, "Were I to be pleased with my extant situation, how could I fulfill my duty to combat slavery?" There is here at SADC0 a personal vow of

"voluntary impoverishment"—not only of body and soul, but of the mind. Within the octagonal structure are television sets, a library, ping-pong tables, a gymnasium, and weekly revues. There is even a cocktail lounge called, ironically, "The Gone Room." But, to my knowledge, no one ever partakes of these diversions. They are here—temptation exists; but, as Bagby said, before his abrupt and tragic Termination, **"You have to give up a little of life in order to make friends with death."** The one exception regarding group pleasure was the senior women's judo team which Dr. Feasel personally coached.

One of the first things the Initiate observes is that, while SADCO is a one-story building, there are 34 elevators. We live underground; I myself at Minus-9, Professor Reek on Minus-12, and General Horn in Minus-14 where the radioactive animals are kept. Horn was with the Induced Leprosy Project until he became intrigued with mutations. In his circular office hung many framed mottoes to remind us of the perils of socialist isms; **"Brotherhood Is the Scheme Whereby One Man Shares His Poverty with Another."** **"Whoever Would Beat Swords into Plowshares Must Sooner or Later Reap a Radioactive Crop."** It is unfortunate that he was caught having intercourse with one of the radioactive kangaroos; he was a capable man: he never smoked or drank or played musical instruments.

Paula Reiber held no brief for anyone remotely connected with the old-fashioned Army. In one of the nerve-gas problems she embarrassed the General by asking, "If everybody in the Pentagon slept through World War Three, would they wake up in time for number five or six?"

Horn, who has a breath impediment, was unable to speak for several minutes. I remember him now, gasping and purple, while she fed sheet after sheet into her Calibrator. I recall that we both watched while her nimble fingers played at the multiple buttons. Her hands were like spiders—dead at times, and curled upwards—but quick on the draw in a mathematical duel. And of course she was right; the Pentagon, according to the IBM Calibrators, lay in a coma until deep into the middle of World War Seven, although by then that structure would have been in ashes.



Paula Reiber is an example of the personnel problems that occur in a cloistered, ascetic world such as ours. On the other hand, several of the so-called (I use this expression for want of a more descriptive word) *females* see the computers only as rivals. Granted; machine adulation is a substitute for penis-envy; yet even SADCO males feel a masculinity-inadequacy which reveals itself in overt forms, such as sleeping nude upon sharp objects, or eating the phosphorus off matchbook covers. Professor Reek is an example: One of the most loyal, group-wise scientists we have—famous at the age of nineteen for his theories on psychologically induced suicide—he would walk resolutely into my office, tripping the Panic Button without apologizing, and beg for thumb tacks.

"But you've been sitting on dozens of them all week!" I said.

"I want 3 dozen! I want to *feel! Feel!* Until I can stop feeling!"

"Flagellation will get you nowhere."

"I don't want to get anywhere—I just want to feel that I've stopped *feeling!*"

He was a discredit to our way of life on these occasions—whimpering, leaking all over the place, and letting his nose run all over the South African problem on my table.

"Take some cocaine," I said.

"I already have," he said, aware that I was at a complete loss when forced to deal with human problems.

"Well then, take some more."

"No! No! I want *penance*, not therapy! I am unworthy of SADCO. Do you hear! Unworthy!"

Why? For some petty reason. He may have abused his machines. He may even have entertained untidy thoughts about relationships with human members of the opposite sex. On such occasions, I usually ended up giving him a box of thumb tacks, even though anyone caught sitting on or swallowing them faced serious charges. The same holds true for matches and cigarette lighters. Paula Reiber—if I might mention her again—often burned her lower regions when disturbed by a particularly recalcitrant problem. Once, when she had been awarded the project for

eliminating Cuba—one of the top plums at SADCO—she pleaded that she was unworthy.

"*All* are unworthy," Dr. Feasel told her, in person. "Civilization is built upon the flotsam of the ego!"

"But some more so than others! I don't deserve Cuba! Everybody wants a chance to get at that hirsute man!"

Feasel, of course, convinced her that humility in some instances is but a camouflage for secret feelings of failure. Reiber went to work. The problem was to provide a series of induced tidal waves that would level the island, drowning all occupants. For seven days Paula and her computers played out the exercise mathematically. She showed me the calluses on her fingertips and complained, "I've *slaved* over Castro!"

"Rome wasn't destroyed in a day," I said encouragingly.

"But my machines have built up some kind of a block! They—they—" She crumpled a sheet of paper, then uncrumpled it. "They sometimes act as though they're afraid of the water."

Water. I think, then, that I suspected something deep beneath Reiber's tidal wave. Shortly afterward, she took to insulting Professor Reek, who happens to wear a beard. We all guessed what would follow; loathing would turn to friendliness. Feelings of friendliness would cause a Relationship. And Relationships with living things can end only with unclean thoughts.

I seem to remember that the two top buttons on Reiber's vest remained open during this situation, that the knot on her necktie was improperly loose, and her trouser creases unbefitting one of her rank. The predicted symptoms followed; she avoided drinking water, whether fresh or salt. She asked Reek if he knew how to swim. When he replied in the negative, she pleaded with him to learn. That failing, she gave him a life-preserver on the pretext that it was for his birthday. And then, abruptly, at 7:09 on the twelfth day, she came into my office, staggering under three plastic dossiers filled with data. I had been expecting her—although my Computers hadn't predicted Paula Reiber until at least 7:14.

"I'm early," she said.

"Yes. Are you badly burned?"

"Yes, and feeling great." Her smile was hard and vacant.

I politely asked about her Cuban tidal wave.

"It turns out I'm quite worthy after all!" She thumbed some pages which appeared to be actually wet. I noted that her fingertips were crisscrossed with Band-Aids. "Cuba's gone. No survivors. Not a trace."

At times like this you yearn to reveal admiration and gratitude. At SADCO you do not. I merely accepted the soggy sheets and fed them into my personal secretary. Paula moved swiftly towards the door. She was almost out when I heard my own voice inquire softly, "—and Professor Reek—?"

Her eyes were superbly empty, shining, amoral. "He shaved this afternoon at 5:43."

Personality problems such as these are the expected here. As Brainard complained, "A billion dollars worth of intricate equipment, and all of it subject to the frailties of fingers affected by emotions." Consequently we are endeavoring to replace ourselves with lower forms of animals whose fingers can be depended upon to function "mechanically." Already we have proven that raccoons excel West Point graduates by 4.8% on control-panel exercises. As for Brainard, his own rating was almost equal to those of any of the lower mammals, but he suffered from inverted respiration. A mathematician who perspires inwardly cannot go far at SADCO. Sooner or later the index finger becomes taut; the thumb will curl outward, his computers will be going awry. The first signs are subtle—inability to enter the Men's Rest Room, or avoidance of sticky desserts between meals. (I think, somewhere, I mentioned that Dr. Brainard is no longer with us, having been Terminated for unscrewing bottlecaps after curfew.)

Shortly after the Reiber episode my superiors asked if I would like to play around with the Moon.

"But I'm not—"

I caught myself starting to say "worthy." Secret fears of failure! I stopped. I sat there, doing my finger exercises and listened. They handed me a dossier nearly twelve inches thick. For the next few days, I had my mechanical readers telescope the work, marvelling at the efficiency of our secret service team. They had



ferreted out the most petty details without losing the larger picture; they had enough on the Moon to build a case . . .

Our problem was to destroy it before Russia or France could infiltrate. But through which of several strategies?

General Horn reminded me that we would have to be cautious. Elimination of the moon would pose certain problems on the planet Earth—tides might be affected, certain animal and plant habits would be altered. Then, having gone through these formalities, he concluded lamely, "But of course Earth, itself, is going to be altered."

His tape, I noticed, had been spliced 18 times. (I should mention that we at SADC0 often converse through recorders, since the proximity of facial expressions tends to alter the meanings of words.) The larger problem concerned the other stars or planets; since we would use the moon as a springboard to knock out Venus, Mars, and—if necessary—Jupiter, some living animal would have to be placed there to perform reconnaissance. I requisitioned H. J. K. Bagby—famous for his animal relationships.

"We're on the moon," I told him.

"Right."

"We need a small animal to perform certain manual and instinctual chores."

"Do you mind—?" Without hesitating, he inserted several sheets of paper into my machines. I watched as his fingers roamed over the buttons. The multicellular light flashed. He reached over, grasped the answer, then crumpled it as Paula Reiber had taught him. I looked at it. The answer was, of course, fleas.

"You're quite certain you didn't hit a wrong button, Bagby?"

He shook his head. "Quite! You know damned well that the boys down at Cape Canaveral couldn't send anything bigger than that 250,000 miles into space!"

For an instant, I encountered some negative thoughts about Bagby. His trouser pockets bulged with unsightly wads of crumpled manuscript. His gloves were always soiled. His bifocal glasses were a fake—worn only to mask expressions of comradeship that leaked through his soft eyes. Daily, at 1:04, he took out

a nylon handkerchief and dusted his shoes, although dust here is electronically atomized.

"Bagby," I asked, "are you certain you're ready?"

"Just getting warmed up, sir."

I stopped it there. H. J. K. Bagby was skating the treacherous waters of fellowship. In a moment he would be smiling and shaking hands.

Reek, Reiber, Horn, Brainard, and Bagby.

All of them were colleagues unable to "cross over" to the demands of immortality. For global destruction was merely a fraction of our task. As Feasel said, "So long as there remains a star, a planet, the sun or moon, our way of life is threatened. We must build our offenses on the presumption that whoever isn't for us is against . . . there can be no neutrals in the Universe. . . ."

Reek and Horn never learned that there is more to modern warfare than commanding a field soldier to turn a valve and immerse a continent with cyanide. Brainard—although a pioneer with radioactive snails—throttled his logic with *a priori* experiences. Bagby was cursed with imagination. All have been Terminated now—Reiber among the last. Yet I must report that she died gallantly, in line of duty, however misguided her curiosity might have been.

Reiber had been (unbeknown to us) experimenting with her own calculators in the area reserved for Dr. Feasel himself, i.e., the whole, basic perspective of SADCO. The question was, in effect, "What is the single, most serious threat to Peace?" As Feasel states, "We are the world's watchdog; our duty is to bite whoever would harm our Master." But it must be plain even to the lay reader that the problem is constantly changing. Once it was England; twice it was Germany; now it is Russia, China, Cuba, India, Japan, France, South America, Australia, and—ultimately—the United Nations. The machines feed on new factors, erase old ones, compensate, alter and correct. Why Paula Reiber took it upon herself to deviate from her allotted field, we are unable to guess. Some felt that she behaved disloyally. Others

blamed it on an unfortunate relationship with a bacteria-carrying gibbon in the Contamination Lab. I saw only that her old spitting habit had returned; she had lost control of her lower regions. She was impatient with the way things were going on Saturn.

She awoke me on the night of October 23 at, I believe, 11:49. Her vest was completely unbuttoned. Her eyes were crossed and her hair stood on end. I knew that something was amiss.

"They got me!" she screamed.

"Who?"

Her head tossed wildly in the direction of the Calibration Rooms. Her face was scarred (At the time I assumed it to be only cigarette burns), and her fingers—I saw with agony her invaluable fingers! There was no skin, only reddened flesh. I granted her permission to tell me what had happened.

"I'm unworthy! Do you hear! *Unworthy!*"

I reminded her, as I had done before, that all are unworthy.

"That's exactly the point! *Unworthy! All of us!*"

"You didn't have to get all—all messed up to find that out!"

"I had to know! Know!" She relieved herself of a thumb tack. Her voice became cold and clear. "I confess to harboring doubts. I had to know in my own mind if we were tackling this thing in the best possible way."

"What thing, Miss Reiber?" I noticed that her fingers clawed painfully at her vest. All of the buttons were gone, nibbled away. We both knew she was through at SADCO. "Get on with it," I urged, "then send yourself down to External Security."

"All right. But I want you to know that I knew what I was doing! I'll have no pity—no rationalizing." She affixed her expressionless smile. She had lost a tooth. "All right—so I played around with Feasel's problem! I fed Feasel into the machines over and over and over! I asked—"*What constitutes the greatest single threat to Peace!*"

"And? And? What does?"

"War."

"Quite right, Miss Reiber. Anything else?"

"The Pentagon."

"The Pentagon?"



She had noticed that the red Panic bulb was lit. The pumps in DeCon would be laboring. Our dialogue was going out to every department over closed circuit. I suspect she was enjoying the scene, my complicity, for she continued with unnecessary volume, "I then asked the Calibrators whom they'd *attack* in order to preserve peace. Same answer—the Pentagon! They threw the book! Missiles, bombs, planes, chemicals. When the green lights came on there were no Army, Navy, or Marines left. Nothing! Not even an old-fashioned machine-gun!"

I thought I detected some kind of warped triumph in the woman's eyes.

"Reiber," I said gently, "did it ever occur to you that your computers were behaving selfishly?"

"Yes. It occurred to me."

"I'm sure that it would. Because it is only natural they'd pick our own military installations—which are closer and easier. Your machines didn't like the risk of going clear over to China and Russia—they're lazy and frightened. They might fail, they might be destroyed through massive retaliation."

"But it's like a stab in the back!" Paula's naked red fingers worked awkwardly with a pencil and paper.

"It's expedient, that's all. 'War' is the greatest threat to 'peace.' To them, the Pentagon is war. Sooner or later their personal safety will be jeopardized by our armed forces—indirectly, of course. Through enemy retaliation. It therefore behooves them to strike out at the most obvious—"

"But it seems shortsighted! If they knock down our own defenses, then they're wide open to attack from enemy nations." She worked her fingers ineffectually. "Everybody knows that—even career generals."

"The generals do, but your Computers don't. Their reasoning carries only so far—it takes two to make a fight. Get rid of either contestant and you have 'peace.'"

"And enslavement."

"After all, they're only machines."

"But isn't there such a thing as machine loyalty? Don't they have some kind of obligation to—*us*?"

"Your mistake was in giving them free choice. Peace at any price—"

"Then we must convince them of a higher duty."

"Right, Miss Reiber—duty, loyalty, and even personal sacrifice. Patriotism, if you'll permit an old-fashioned phrase—" I saw that she was painfully scribbling mathematical equations. I knew that her doubts or misgivings had been purged through personal conversation. I urged her to take a bath and then report to the Doctors.

"But I haven't finished! I haven't even begun!" She tore a lock of scorched hair from her head. "See this? *This* is the finish!"

The odor of burned hair offends me. Nevertheless, we here at SADCO do not allow small discomforts to interfere with the larger issues. I signalled for Reiber to go on.

"I stuffed them with it, the lazy, selfish sons of bitches. Loyalty, patriotism, duty, sacrifice, idealism, martyrdom. I hand-fed them sheet after sheet. It was the biggest indoctrination course ever instigated here." She pressed her palm experimentally against a thumb tack. "And do you know something—it worked!"

"Good, Miss Reiber. Then you've finally worked your way back to where you began."

"Not quite."

An interesting expression had come into her eyes.

"Not quite. Before, you remember, the Calibrators were merely carrying out orders, solving problems. They weren't supposed to have a perspective. No idealism, no dedication to the common good."

"And now?"

"Tonight, I felt as though they were ready. I slipped in and sat down beside the Mark Seven which is more or less the spiritual leader of my group. I tested it on preliminary exercises. Its answers were consistently correct. We spared the Pentagon. We engaged the enemy. The war was over in 19 minutes—though of course there were total casualties on both sides."

"And your Computers knowingly let themselves get blown up?"



She nodded. "They were completely destroyed according to their own calculations."

"Then you succeeded in imparting feelings of patriotism and loyalty—"

"Right!" Reiber's voice suddenly became ominous. "Right. But sometimes loyalty can take distorted forms—"

"Oh, Miss Reiber?"

"Oh, decidedly. Because right after that I let the machines have free choice. Yes—they were performing honorably and unselfishly. I felt I could trust them to do their own thinking. I figured it was safe to ask them the big question—'What is the greatest present danger to world peace?'"

"Feasel's Problem, more or less—"

"More." Reiber leaned over and spat. "Dr. Junior Feasel confined his problems to political and military strategy. *I* was willing to go a step further. Yes!" Her upper lip quavered. "Tonight, I hand-fed them the question. They accepted, but they began to shudder violently. They gave off strange sounds. I knew they were fighting for truth—they were going to answer the question regardless of the price. It was a wonderful and terrible thing to watch!"

A strange feeling came over me. I waited.

"Then—with a wonderful movement, the Mark Seven ejected!" Paula threw a crumpled, scorched, bloodstained wad of paper onto my desk.

Blood doesn't annoy me, although I dislike having sticky substances on my fingertips. I did, however, smooth out the typescript. To my surprise, there appeared to be but one word on the sheet. I was unable to make it out.

"SADCO," Reiber said, her eyes bright and cruel.

"Well—what about it?"

"That's all—SADCO. Ask a stupid question, you get a silly answer." She smiled suddenly. "Have some thumb-tacks—"

Reiber died before all of the details could be pieced together.

It is believed that at first she was as skeptical of the answer as anyone else would be. The fact that the laboratory was dam-



aged and the machines destroyed suggests that she ordered a cross-check. She had, evidently, commanded them to attack the organization named in their answer; graphs show that hundreds of missiles were dispatched in all directions, corrected, and then boomeranged back to the target, leaving a hole where SADCOS stands. It was only on paper, of course, but I was pleased to know that RAND and SLOPE were spared because they, like the Pentagon, are merely subordinates. The actual damage done—confined to Reiber's computers—was nothing more nor less than a suicide attempt; since they were unable to carry out a real obliteration they had done the next best thing. Paula's injuries were sustained when they fused and melted.

Feasel, himself, remains unconcerned over the incident. Unquestionably, in his viewpoint, the Calibrators had been coerced beyond their limits and fell sick with a martyr complex. After all, an over-zealous machine is no better than its fanatical human counterpart. The higher keys on the Mark Seven show definite overtones of idealistic behavior; the charred remains of the others attest to guilts which took the form of patriotism. There also is evidence to support the theory that Reiber, herself, committed button errors. Her third and fourth fingers were noticeably worn.

# The Epicurean: Recalled







# The Epicurean: Recalled

She could remember back—a hundred thousand miles ago, through two Buicks, the Village apartment and her final Ford—to the time she had first met him; somebody in a dimly-lit coupe encountered late at night during a flat tire. Later, he was a man separated from the asphalt by balding retreads, coldly angry, semantically correct, cynical, and neatly pressed into mouse-colored, threadbare suits that were almost reactionarily conservative. Still later, he was a man in a room. It had been there that her reproductive glands had been provoked—in a cubicle wonderfully wrong, spare, neat and negotiated by crossing a furtive landlady and climbing endless steps to a lightless world. And once inside, its most memorable feature had been a view of the Arthur Murray Dance School, fifteen feet away. There had been, also, the not-quite-within-walking-distance restaurant where they went afoot, arm in arm, for the *69 Center*, a full-course dinner patrolled by circling flies and imagined roaches. Afterwards, they had window-shopped for phonographs, Picasso prints, contemporary furniture—possessions to go with their promising looks—the way of life preordained by some invincible

law of justice. It was simply a matter of time, and time had been on their side. They were people with tomorrow in their pockets, moneyless but unbent, embarrassed but dignified, born with a lifetime guarantee. The Plymouth coupe was to become a Cadillac, the Cadillac to park in front of a lakeshore structure of glass and stone and peopled with bright children who attended expensive but progressive schools. Even the coupe's blurring horn had been an advertisement for the sad, crooked smile of youth on its way. And in the public library Friday nights they had read each other across books, taking their cues from *Esquire*, *Town & Country*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

"And then what happened?" the analyst asked.

"We didn't get married."

"Is that all?"

"Yes—" She permitted a full minute of contemplation to go by, approximately forty cents for the purpose of dramatizing a mood. "Yes—that's all."

Now there would elapse several minutes of silence before guilt prompted the analyst to evoke another answer. She lay there, eyes on the ceiling, staring at the dimly-lit Plymouth and its plaid seatcovers; it had been the same as love on genuine leather with the added bonus that it was the beginning, not the end. Some kind of mental mathematics had enticed them onward; if it was like this in a '39 coupe, then, oh dear God, what would it be in an El Dorado convertible climbing above Acapulco harbor? The answer seemed to crouch behind his sometimes eager, sometimes insolent eyes, awaiting only the nod of some hesitant bank president. For Johnny had been designed by the same engineers who created destiny; his poverty was a serious but temporary challenge to the American Way. He was not a man ordained to ask if he might change your battery, nor one to take reservations in a travel agency. His kind never turned up in your doorway peddling hot parakeets from Argentina, his fingers were not to move shamefully across the keys of office typewriters. No—in an airplane he would be pilot, on a ship, captain, and in any war, a major.

"Why do you think you didn't get married?"

It was the analyst at last, four dollars wealthier and guiltier. And she wondered—as though the question had been sprung by a surprise witness in a higher court—Why Do I Think We Didn't? Because Johnny had bought a Chrysler and moved before they got around to it? Because while she was descending from her father's four-bathroom Tudor and into streetcars and apartments, Johnny was heading uptown? Aloud she said, "Because he wanted to become an architect."

Architect. The analyst had pronounced the word silently and waited. It was her turn again; it was always her turn, and too expensive, waiting. She said, "He wanted to become an architect and so he became a home loan financier. Johnny—that was his name I believe—"

"Was Johnny interested in architecture?"

"No. Epicureanism."

"Oh—?"

The analyst had surprised her and now she was surprising herself. There was another expensive silence while the statement struggled for conviction. But it was true. Architecture had been a secondary drive, an avocation, the shortcut to exotic soups. Johnny's hands were to grasp Martinis in low-lit drawing rooms while his voice impassionately defended antique leather, Paris, and Mahler. His Homburg was to turn up at important addresses and his Chrysler past was something he'd admit with the laconic laughter of one able to recall a period, temporary but preposterous. He was to fire at birds with a custom-made 12-gauge double and, later, discuss truffles through a bouquet of American Beauties with a girl seated at a Steinway, confident that his tweed jacket could be tossed anywhere with the label showing. Already he had passed *Esquire*; *Town & Country* would have to stand by, hat in hand, while he moved against the weather in a mackintosh, closing banks, humiliating Big Steel, donating his symphony subscription to the staff of an orthopedic hospital because the conductor was a butcher. Aloud she said, staring at the ceiling, "Johnny never liked chicken-fried steak. He thought it was wrong—"

The analyst coughed. She accepted it as the sound of a viewpoint, a statement, a request for elaboration.



"He was critical of practically everything, but that was because he was a perfectionist. I gave him a Bulova on his thirty-fourth birthday and I don't think he ever quite got over it. One night we had to drive sixty miles in the rain because a friend of his discovered a new lobster house. He gave all of my phonograph records to the janitor's son. Do you know why?"

The analyst cleared his throat. She was uncertain whether he was going to cough Yes or No, but she went on. "He did it because the violins were distorted—they were brand new long-playing records but his ears were hypersensitive. He threw away my saddleshoes because the white was scuffed. I was furious. I told him they just needed polishing. He said some people just shouldn't own saddleshoes. Like white sidewall tires. Soiled white-wall tires were worse than Plymouth coupes that were dirty. Do you get the picture?"

The analyst had, of course, fallen silent again. She knew him sitting there with an almost fraudulent moustache, concentrating totally on nothing, signalling when she slipped with something important by scribbling on a sheet of paper. Finally he said, "What are you thinking now?" She heard her own voice saying, "Bouillabaisse."

"Bouillabaisse. What does bouillabaisse suggest?"

She was pleased that he dare repeat the word, though of course he couldn't spell it. She said, "Johnny could break down a bouillabaisse like a detective retracing a crime. I remember him in a small, allegedly French, restaurant where we went to celebrate something. I see him across the checkered tablecloth. I hear him saying, 'Oysters—probably gulf. Crab. Lobster. Shrimp. Either grouper or snapper—'"

"What was the occasion celebrated?"

"I've forgotten. It doesn't matter anymore—"

"Forgotten?"

No. One didn't forget, unless it was important. But she remembered only that Johnny had been the gourmet on that occasion, the invincible, demanding connoisseur whose tongue announced the vintage year—

The analyst said, "How do you know he was correct in naming the ingredients of the bouillabaisse?"

She thought, yes—how do I know? Aloud she said, "I don't know. But on occasions when it could be tested he was amazing. I remember he could tell Luckies from Philip Morris blindfolded. At a friend's house he named the spices and wine in a scallopini made by the host. It was the same with music, he could tell who was conducting what orchestra when you played a record. He could finger a dress or a suit and tell you what it was, how much it cost—almost."

"Would you say Johnny demonstrated some kind of extra-sensory ability?"

It was as close to a catch-question as the analyst ever allowed himself. She said "Of course not. Johnny used ordinary senses but they were extraordinary. I mean—" she stopped. Something was wrong with the sentence, but hell, it was free-association. She continued. "An engine noise gave Johnny an actual earache. He brooded every time the refrigerator went on. He got out of bed at the most critical moment just because the chimney ventilator needed oiling—"

"Does this suggest anything to you?"

She started to say, "How do you mean that?" but of course he meant it whatever way she suspected he meant it. She realized that her eyes were open again, that the ceiling still retained its thread of cobweb and the beginning of a crack in the plaster. She said, "You want me to tell you what that calls up? It calls up the possibility that Johnny was a fanatic. The others are fakes, stuffed shirts, snobs. They use their eyes to tell them that Stroganoff tastes like Stroganoff. I mean, they see it on the plate, or on the menu, or their ears have heard somebody else say that such and such a place makes it wonderfully. Johnny didn't go by the label. Johnny lived and experienced through his senses—"

"And this was important?"

She nodded. "Because I loved him. I loved epicureanism because Johnny was an epicurean. It's perfectly normal, loving somebody for what they are."

From outside, she could hear the noon whistle and sense the sudden change in the lives of thousands of people whose habit patterns were dictated by clocks. They would be pouring out of the catacombs, animated like children released from school, older and more conditioned; bigger, but slower, and not as hungry. Somewhere among them was Johnny, dropping towards the ground floor, an arm around the broad back of a colleague while he proclaimed Michigan's superiority over Purdue, joking with smaller men with bigger bottoms, men whose only exercise was driving golf balls, driving automobiles, driving secretaries into corners. It was normal to love them for what they were. . . .

"Did Johnny carry his epicureanism into his relationships with women?"

"Yes. No. I mean, he didn't apply it to me—I mean we were simply in love, and his perfectionist drive came out only on man-made things. Like cars. Hi-fi sets. The decor in a theatre, and of course the play itself—the cast, the direction. Design, flavor, taste—"

"Oh?"

There were a hundred ways to pronounce the word "oh" and the one chosen by the man beside her couch was plainly "aha!" The problem had been unmasked; she'd stumbled across the criminal without recognizing him, and this was because 'his' wrong was Everyman's wrong—preferring the man-made object to God-made love. Lusting for the sensual rather than the sexual? "It's true—his drive for me was secondary. The sublime nudged out the actual."

"So—"

"So when Johnny found a woman who matched his candelabra—a female who belonged in a Mercedes-Benz, an opera box, on a horse—"

She had stopped again. Spoken aloud, the words had come through facetious, pat, cynical, but the hurt remained. Intellectualizing conditioned only the intellect. She thought, 'The Libido Should Have Known Better.' Every woman knew, but the speedometer had to turn over a hundred thousand miles before you were convinced you selected the wrong model. She



should have placed her checkbook in the hands of the scientists before buying. She should have carried on a brief affair with her own psyche before taking on an outsider . . .

The hour was almost up. Soundlessly the analyst had indicated it was time to bring things back to harbor, to sum up, conclude an installment. Soundlessly and sightlessly, for without hearing him, without seeing him, she knew he was a passenger on the train checking his luggage, putting on his shoes, fingering his hat. It was something *sensed*—

“So then—”

“So we stopped seeing each other until—until just the other night.”

The analyst seemed to slump with unhappiness. He was giving her cues. He wasn't supposed to, but there simply wasn't time to begin a whole new series of issues. She should have brought it up in the beginning and worked fast. Now it might never happen to turn up again, even though he insisted that important things inevitably came to the surface in one form or another.

“Well?” The analyst waited, then prodded resignedly, “What happened the other night?”

“Nothing. I mean, a lot happened actually. I'm not exactly sure what happened.”

“What is the first thing that comes to mind?”

“Johnny's necktie. His necktie didn't match.”

“And what does that suggest?”

“What does it *suggest*?”

“What comes to mind?”

“A word. Garish—”

“Garish?”

“Jaded. Insensitive. No longer the epicurean.”

Again the room waited silently for conversation. The analyst's watch ticked more loudly, the sounds from the street seemed to proclaim that she was running on borrowed time. What more was to be said? The necktie had some color that clashed with Johnny's suit; its owner had lost the ability to tell green from blue, right from wrong, true from false.

“Well—”

Firmly, the analyst was nudging her on. She said, "Do you think a person loses his sensitivity by selling his soul?" The analyst had become a lifeless thing, silent and stern. There would be no answer; there had been no question, really. The answer already lay in her archives, along with the Junior Prom announcement from Smith, and the newspaper stories of Johnny's marriage, and her father's obituary.

"What do you think about chicken-fried steak *now*?"

Impossibly, she had been taken by surprise again. It was impossible because she was, actually, thinking about chicken-fried steak. That—and the illegal, hopeful occasion when they'd gone to the Capri where Johnny ordered scallopini. Adamantly she had insisted upon chicken-fried steak for herself, vaulting Johnny's embarrassment with the assertion that a sentiment was implied; besides, she really liked it. With a truly admirable recovery he'd stared down the waiter and given their orders. They had joined in a toast from something bottled in 1941, the year of his Chrysler, and then, under rosy, low lights he'd brought forth his sad, worn, crooked, successful smile—the same one he'd forged during the architectural days—and said, "I know it sounds unkind, darling, but for me chicken-fried steak was always wrong."

"Well, what are you thinking now?"

The analyst had intruded again. She shifted slightly on the couch; he made her uncomfortable, looking down over her shoulder while she sat at a table looking into the misleading eyes of her lover. She said, "I'm thinking that veal scallopini tastes like chicken-fried steak if you're hungry enough or poor enough or rich enough."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the waiter made a mistake."

"Go on—" The analyst's voice was plainly urgent; the sound of a man way past his lunch time, possibly anticipating scallopini or bouillabaisse. He was hurrying her back to harbor, aware also that he was about to be tricked.

"Yes. Well, we went out together—I told you—and his necktie was wrong. And, when the orders came, he stuck his fork into his, tasted it, leaned back and stared into space with a critical ex-



pression. And then his face went into all of its old epicurean grimaces. So I inquired carefully, 'How is the scallopini?' "

The analyst, she realized, was writing furiously. She said, "Do you want to know what Johnny said, or don't we have time?"

"Whatever comes to mind—"

"Johnny comes to mind, of course. He made little reverent, moaning sounds and said, 'It's beautiful! There ought to be a law against! I hate to admit it but they've gone and done it again. Exactly like they do it at a place I discovered in Rome before the war—'"

"Well—"

"The waiter had made a mistake. Evidently he didn't think chicken-fried steak was wrong for Johnny. I got the scallopini and I never said a word. I wanted to see what would happen with Johnny. The son of a bitch couldn't tell the difference."

The analyst had ceased writing. Slowly she worked herself off the couch and onto her feet and began getting her things together. They had made it full-circle, running off a hundred thousand miles in little over an hour, telescoping time and emotion, and had landed safely, apathetically, again. But she had helped. At some later date the analyst would want to know why *she* thought chicken-fried steak wasn't wrong for Johnny. And he would probe her reasons for calling her lover a son of a bitch, since—as they both knew—he no longer existed except as an obsolete motor-car, a room without a view, an epicurean without a palate.





# The Man Impossible & Elegant

About Fred Vreppé this is all there is to be said, a man impossible yet elegant, a man as elegant as he should be in danger everywhere at all times. Drop Fred Vreppé in anywhere into the middle of Africa or Arabia and they'll show up sides for the living in the living of him. Love—that is all right, nobody is endangered of him and living. But because an object of longing and you've provided an answer for them all, the way Fred Vreppé put laughter mixed up, smiling, smiling you, sending you in front of what. The way his eyes is worn, it is a fine shadow and about as lightness, a love that didn't stop and thank the. When I've seen him brush a smile—fair was it. He has made the old world for everything, the old world, the city. He has been proud and proud for so long, it's like the 1920s. Cherry has the feeling of a woman's feeling, elegant and good, and by looking at the beautiful woman's eyes, looking at it, I'm sure





# The Man Impossible & Elegant

About Fred Vruppe this is all there is to be told, a man impossible yet elegant, a man so impossible his life should be in danger anywhere, at all times. Drop Fred Vruppe by parachute into the middle of Alaska or Africa and they'll choose up sides for the loving or the hating of him. Love—that is all right, nobody is endangered from real loving. But become an object of loathing and you've provided an excuse for them all; the way Fred Vruppe's laughter comes up, scalding, scolding you, dirtying you in front of others. The way his anger is worn, it is a hot madness not clean or righteous, a hate that didn't stop and think first. Often I've seen him tarnish a sunny July with it. He has made the sea colder for swimming, the rain wetter, the sky blacker. Your proud new motorcar he can make into a 1934 Chevy just by hearing new noises, feeling vibration and road shock, by twisting off the windshield button without seeming to try. Vruppe

makes elevators seem unsafe; glamour girls he renders drab, and drab girls feel they've become unzipped somewhere they wouldn't know about.

About his heart. It is a small hard thing like a billiard ball. Drop it, and you have a dent in your floor. If he throws it your way, duck. Held in the hand it is heavy, but in his hands, he takes it out and shows it to you, then puts it back in his right rear pocket where he keeps the parimutuels. His hands, too—at funerals they are in gray gloves, unpeeled for shaking, clasped in the easy dignity of ambassadors from the underprivileged countries. I've seen his fingers work at squeezing moths and spiders or run up and down the necks of mandolins like spiders, while from his lips came sounds quavering, dedicated, drowning; a steamship smothered in fog, inviting the shoals to pierce his vulnerable bottom any old time—an obsolescent B-36 out of control, coming down from ten thousand on a dead stick. His own mandolin hated him; he hated it back and thrived on the hate. In any bank his fingers darted under the teller's gate like twin runaway monsters, seizing bills by the napes of their necks, and burrowing into his pockets as though the police were coming. While his face remained alien—apart and pretending that it had absolutely nothing to do with the transaction, professing that it had never seen those hands before in its life.

"I'm anybody, anywhere, anytime—" he used to shout unnecessarily, "give me a horse and I'm a cowboy. Give me a cowboy and I'm an American housewife at a matinee. Give me a housewife and I'm a young salesman with my foot in her door, reciting clichés, establishing desire through interfrequency modulation."

And then his aroused laughter! Causing mice to spang suicidally into holes too small for them, making sparrows spring into flight as though fed a million volts. People would shake themselves off and go home; dogs wouldn't show their humiliated eyes until mealtime. And Fred Vruppe and I would have nothing more to do for the rest of the afternoon, other than fraternize with one another horizontally while society drifted past on its chrome and rubber.

Remember those overpadded, soiled afternoons with sycamore leaves gliding in from the acrid sky, leaves thrown from the nest, sacrificed for autumn, discarded as ballast by trees that really had no place to go? Where the hell did it all get you? Fred would demand. Why have another day when you hadn't even used up the last? And man's bland cruelty to everything—yachts sailing on the bay, frustrating the wind, making it detour, forcing it to do a little work before it could move on. Or, electricity whining to get past the refrigerator so it could go home, but instead, having to work all night. And water in the pipes! Its only freedom was when the pipes broke. Thousands of gallons of it pushing and compressing, all of it in a hurry and for what?—to jump into a pot and get scalded over the fire.

"What if all the water in the world organized? What if every drop united for a single purpose—the overthrow of man?"

Fred said this on July seventh. On July eighth I had the answer. I said, "The roof would break."

"Brilliant!" he shouted. "The absolute essence of human reasoning. The absolute summation of everything after forty million years of war and peace, of plagues and typhoons—"

His eyes at times like this were the eyes of snakes swimming on white deserts. His left foot—swinging wild in economical little circles. His fingers symbolically pinch the heads off snails. His lips tell sad little lies by smiling. His tongue—hidden, and sleeping tranquilly in mucus—awaiting a time to be born and strike out at the world. But the amorality of snakes! They are mechanical instruments, with no more expression than a pair of binoculars. I wonder to myself, silently of course, why a human shall ride to work on buses, morning after morning in support of snakes, when there exist mice or gophers?

"We're out of canned beer, dear."

This he says in the exclamatory vein; a startling and thoroughly inexcusable discovery. You are supposed to board your bicycle and pedal uphill to old Louie's where anybody's credit is in a constant state of war, and full-sized dried mushrooms in baskets are nudged by weevils. Louie will say, "How's the gent—the genius" and then commence his prosecutions. He will chase you until you



chase him; profanity will give way to sexual probes, hints, conclusions. But you can coast all the way back to Fred Vruppe who ignores your departure and arrival until he is handed an open beer. And then he will exclaim, "Not for me! I don't want any beer. I only mentioned the fact that there wasn't any."

If a man is not a man among men but is a man among women it is not enough. Fred Vruppe cannot play the mandolin among men, because men wish horns; he is an unemployed musician among men, waiting for a return of the string-percussive years. His last job was in thirty-two, with a Filipino orchestra but Fred still spends one afternoon per month at Union headquarters, his hat pushed down over his eyes, his fingers yearning for something to squeeze. You wonder, then, why I say he is dangerous?

Permit me to add that a man dangerous is in danger himself because people afraid take action to rid themselves of what they fear, by spying over the telephone, reporting to the police, finding your dog without his license, your husband without pants. Or, telling it to the G-people that you might be subversive, no visible means of support, living out of wedlock, or ogling small girls. Ogling small girls is what he did, all right, but there is a difference between peering and staring, like making a pass at a girl, or passing a girl on the make.

He saw her pass by every day, the girl. He saw her because like fat men unemployed he filled up the rocker on the porch, getting more fat and doing more thinking, and what else is there in the world for fat men to do if they're too far away from the sea to go down and float it out? Any day, slowly rocking on the porch, in summer with fans, in winter with football through portable radio. The fights at nights; cuties on TV, a can of beer. Always sassy and sour but it is better than being thin, and having turnstiles laugh at you, or stand in crowds and be seen through. But the prejudice is against the fat. Mothers don't sweat or freeze when a thin man ogles her child, but a fat man! His mass suggests actual power. Even if he's winded from walking from the bathroom. Fred Vruppe had gotten so he no longer could get his potatoback mandolin between his massive thighs; the thing was like a child's football, lost among the folds, and I had been trying

to get him to sell it and order from Sears something thinner, possibly a reed instrument. The picture is dynamic, a huge man propped onto a spindling chair, his great mass harnessed to the delicate job of forcing puffs of air into a silver and black tube while thousands of bobby-soxers swayed on the ballroom floor. But instead, Fred took to rocking back and forth on the porch, watching little Sally Ann walk past on the way to school, waiting for her to grow up for him, imagining a daily increase in her size, her shapes, as the weeks dragged past, waiting for her to reach the self-conscious stage where she'd have to lower her eyes, foreseeing the future when one day she would raise them and duel with his. Waiting, but also worried that by the time she was ready he might be too fat to do it.

"I think it's a disgusting thing," the assistant deputy told him, "absolutely, a disgrace."

"I haven't done anything yet," Fred said fatly.

"The girl stays awake nights over worrying about walking past your porch."

"She can walk on the other side of the street."

"There is a poodle over there and she's afraid of poodles." The deputy's hard, kind eyes seemed to float in perspiration. He was a man about to experience vapor-lock. Then he added, "You could do your rocking on the back porch."

"There's bees back there. I hate to swat bees."

"All right, Fred, but this is a friendly warning—"

I said, "He needs a vacation. Fred's not been on a vacation for thirty-two years. He needs a rest, a change. A man gets tired of being fat year after year with no let-up."

"Thirty-two years?" the deputy said. "The Judge would only give him five or six." Injustice put sadness to his voice.

I said, "Thirty-two years he's been on call from the Union, waiting for mandolins to come into their own again. Never a day to call his own, never a night. Even a fireman has his days off."

"I'd respect him more if he'd button his fly," the deputy said. "Why is it fat men don't bother to button their buttons? Why does he raise all those guinea pigs? I got rabbits, but hell, I don't let them run all over me."

Always there are stars on police cars, and always, no matter how quietly they go, the neighborhood curtains move, shades open a crack, doors are ajar. On silent overshoes ride the cops, but terror is passed along ahead of them, person to person. A hated man is the law's lover, moving hand in hand across the statues, over the stooped shoulders of public opinion, wise to the patronizing smile, the proffered tip, the smell of solicitude. And as the deputy rides away, children scream out their parents' loathing; dogs put into works what their masters can't say. But Fred and the cops are only good for hating each other. He is too fat, even for the police force. His only alternative is to ask the girl if she would care to subscribe to mandolin lessons, two for the price of one, and special lessons thrown in. This is because he is behind in his dues to the Legion. Where he is in the Legion, and fat enough only to get around, he would give the Junior Girls their shooting lessons down at the old rifle range.

Such activities make a man less dangerous, because now he can squeeze against dozens of them in station wagons enroute, coming and going. He can sample their proximity, brush their skin, know their size—all in a YMCA way, platonic and fatherlike, pinching them brotherly; all is wholesome fun, not dirty, and devoted to the future of youth. But whoever is caught in a rocker on the porch knows girls only from his eyes, the occasional ear, and upon such scant information the imagination grows, ad libbing for the missing statistics.

It is no secret therefore that a man hated will try desperately to make love.

It was Saturday that I knew he was hated.

"What are you two doing?" I insisted.

"I told her she could stroke my mandolin."

The girl took a quick bite out of her O'Henry bar. She smiled while chewing flagrantly at me. I said, "Why do you have to be barefoot to play the mandolin?"

"I dunno—" The phrase was flung out carefree, and abruptly dismissed. "He just said it would be better with my shoes off. I dunno."



It took three deputies to lift Fred off the porch. I stopped the payments on the telescope he'd been promised for his birthday. A lot of old friends, and new friends, came to call and talk about Fred. And more sycamore leaves joined the tears in that annual sadness which is autumn. The day was Saturday but Fred made it Monday for everybody he could lay eyes on. The police were sadists who pistolwhipped teenagers at Halloween parties; their glistening Oldsmobiles were rattling, frail old jitneys, and he was flicking his nose at a decadent society—proudly residing in a slum area—as he was taken away. Even the Holy Bible became a Comic Book that night as I read it, Fred's laughter forcing its way up from hell into the cartoons. Loud, and in need of a bath. But all you could think of were the endless series of dogs to be unsprung against him as his feet stumbled dustily along the side-roads left open for a man impossible, elegant and in danger.



# San Felipe





# San Felipe

## I.

In autumn, the summer moves southward from the great Midwestern plains, dragging its awful scorch, to ride favorable winds into the *Golfo De Baja California*—the inland sea—where lost rivers wander, only to die, finally, of thirst. There, among countable cacti, and even less occasional Ocatillo, a shimmering bleach gives back to the sky all the torrid revenges of the sufferer. It is a vast, stark, stoic, dehydrated wasteland; so far as the eye can see, no thing grows, nothing moves. Rocks await lizards that never come. Rattlesnakes are imagined but never realized, for there exist no birds, mice, cottontail. Even the sand travels unobstructedly, moved by hot winds in a fury to be out of the place; it moves eternally, adrift on unfamiliar flats, vainly seeking some landmark—some monument. To the west, bare, pink, ovenbaked ranges poke up, their fleshless spines providing token respite against late afternoon's lowering sun. But they too are barren, hot enough to singe an Indian's feet; intolerant of animal life. It is only toward the basin's eastern extremity that ruthlessness



abates. For here—impossibly—lies the inland sea, a milky, tepid body of salt water which wandered from its mother, and goes home twice daily, leaving hundreds of miles of hot mud for the sun to bake. Humans have gained a beachhead here; several dozen corrugated tin or board shacks clot the stinking shore. A few plants, stunted but game, have been nursed to maturity by the defecations and urinations of the occupants. There are sorrowful dogs which lead tragic lives, there are a few chickens, goats, and ducks whose total value easily exceeds that of the village. Boat skeletons lean against the structural improvisations where Mexican families listlessly wage a hot war with starvation and death; they are themselves survivors of a long line known for its heroic apathy—well oiled, despite the suck of parched air, satisfied with beans, fish, a few twigs for fuel, a hatful of priceless, rare dung. Fish have contained them there, poised, with one foot in the grave, the other in the water; a lifeline—with a man on one end, a hook on the other. Distances are great under the sun's rebuke. But the sea has been abundant, as if to make up for the land's failure. The stink is so urgent, so profound, that a blowfly released fifty miles to leeward of San Felipe on a normal day will unhesitatingly take flight and set a course.

In more recent years, *Norte Americanos* have invaded the area. Occasional refrigerated trucks thump over rock and rut, driven there by a horsewhipped economy to buy shrimp or fish for Southern California produce wizards. A few naturalists, a few archaeologists organize petty expeditions to the curious tidelands, and—held aloft by the zeal of discovery—exist there long enough to recoup their energy and go home. During one of the wars, a straight, slick asphalt highway was built from Mexicali to the village. Military necessity; if, for some preposterous reason, an enemy expeditionary force were to sail up *el golfo* and flounder upon the stark shores, all would have not been in vain—from there, it would be a swift 90 miles to the United States of America. The strategy was brilliant; build a fine road, the enemy will use it. And if the enemy uses it, you blow up the bridges and stop him. And after the war? The people of Mexico could use the road for walking or dancing. Furthermore, it encouraged international



goodwill, brotherly love. Fat Mexican generals and pink, perspiring American officers introduced each other to tequila, bourbon, girls, gasoline, fish, steaks and alarm clocks. War materiel exchanged freely, always in a one-way direction. The Americans had know-how; they backed their knowledge with fists, guns, graft. And in back of them were 170 million taxpayers.

Jeeps, boats, lorries, guns, rations, tents, radios, field glasses proceeded in orderly fashion past the torrid flats, then got lost or disappeared. At the time of surrender, the village was already on its way back to the abnormal. A few crates of corroded storage batteries provided stepping stones, so that, at low tide, you could walk to the rotting hulk of a landing barge whose only battle had been with sunshine and tornadoes. Uncle had gone; his bottled water had dried up. An engineless bulldozer slept, its fouled parts bleeding oil in the heat. The village slept, dreaming of Scotch whiskey, clinking dollars, packaged cigarettes, and large, sun-burned young men who dreamed of mother, petted the disproportioned dogs, passed out cold while bouncing children on their knees. They had come and gone, leaving only an endless asphalt road, too hot to walk upon with bare feet. But Señor Jesús was not convinced that the world had come to an end again. "Some day," he said, "they come back for the fish." He said it in the cantina, a plywood and fishnet American invention which still served hot beer whenever anybody had a few centavos. He was prophetic, but no one heard. No one was there. Señor Jesús wasn't certain that he, himself, was still there. When you are alone, it is hard to prove that you exist.

## 2.

Johnny Hardluck was the man to make prophecies come true. Wherever he went it was summer. He returned to *el golfo* ten years later, hoping to make history repeat itself. As a sergeant in charge of misplaced supplies, his life in San Felipe had lacked the austerity proper to overseas duty; he had the guns, he had the butter. The daughters of the village fathers had baited his hooks, paddled his boat, and cooled the hot, naked nights while his com-

manding officer was away in Mexicali, setting up last-ditch defenses against the enemy who would never come. But for Johnny, the ensuing peaceful years brought furious economic battles. He tried work and found it wanting. For a while, he was something hopeful in electronics, but got surveyed out of the small business world during the Eisenhower Administration. He tried house-painting, Diesels, door-to-door selling—with and without war decorations—then defected. With a fourwheeled Jeep and surplus fatigues, tents, stoves, and a rifle he had never fired—trophies of war, blackmail and confessed obligation—he drifted southwest. He arrived in the afternoon, caked, dried, dusty, in the middle of the big sleep. He found that the things he remembered were somehow forgotten, and the things he'd forgotten were now remembered. But Señor Jesús was exactly the same, smoking the same quarter-inch-long cigarette, astride the same barrel chair, while the same flies crawled over the same soiled parts of his body.

"You come back for the fish," Señor Jesús informed him.

"Sure, Jack. Got anything to eat?"

Jesús shook his head sadly in the negative. "No. You got any money?"

Johnny shook his head. "No."

The cigarette singed Jesús' lips now. When the pain became greater than the pleasure, he would pinch it out with his calloused fingers.

"That makes us equal," Johnny said, "you got no food, I got no money."

"Not quite. I don't need food."

Johnny said, "I got good rig, Jesús—see that jeep? Runs like a top."

"You got any gas?"

"No. Not enough to get the hell out of here."

Señor Jesús smiled and held out his hands. They held the world; it was a gift to the *Norte Americano*. It included the inland sea, the mountains, the village itself.

"Thanks," Johnny Hardluck told him, "I'll take you up on that offer."

## 3.

In years to come, she knew, she would think about the horrible wonder of it all; the people living like animals, the animals living like people, the people behaving like animals. She would marvel at the stench of some of her best friends, the lack of interment of excrement, the hot, dry threat of sunrise itself. She would know San Felipe as something to talk about after the fact—in a cocktail gown at a Beverly Hills party to celebrate the rising income of some falling star; she would know it as an American fishing camp jammed with heavy sportsmen who came dragging house-trailers, portable toilets, boats, motors, wives, mistresses, children, and mistresses' children, their own dogs, and somebody else's sleeping bag. They came, now, by the hundreds, in Fords, Chevys, Plymouths, Buicks, and in occasional silent Cadillacs that gamely tried to negotiate the terrain. The first thing she saw was Johnny Hardluck, bearded, paunchy, authoritative, deeply baked. The first thing she said was, "There's one in every place you go."

"One what?" her escort—a television director desperately searching for new locations, new reality—wiped his pink face with a limp, brown handkerchief.

"A creep in a jeep."

"How do you know he's a creep?"

"The role he's playing."

"But what role, dear?"

"The leftover GI. Angry young man in fatigues, still playing soldier. They're all over the world. Trying to find themselves. Playing king frog in small foreign ponds. Living off the land, the tourists, the injustice."

He put the station wagon in lower ratio and followed the soft, sandy ruts, thinking it over. She, herself, was left over from a pilot series whose sponsor had sunk back into the shoe business. Her option would be picked up by a middle-aged real estate man who swapped towers on Wilshire Boulevard. She would go for two children, divorce, then start anew with a home in the Hollywood hills. And with that for leverage, she would, eventually, pay the installments on a younger, handsomer man left over from the



Korean campaign. They'd fight. She'd drink too much. He would play around with marijuana. She'd start dating cops. He'd steal the car and get below the border. He might try San Felipe; there were other, newer women like herself coming down here, with men like himself—

Looking straight ahead at absolutely nothing she went on speaking: "Grow a beard, look American, become big daddy for little girls, the authority on the best fishing, the best place to camp. Warn them about water. Helpful tips about lighting fires. Local recipe for baking fish—"

"Good stereotyping," the director said, "tell more."

"Sure. The GI bit has international recognition. You are Yank—generous, crazy, loud, foolish, rich. But you can back it up with fists and guns. And in back of you stands Uncle Sam— Also crazy, loud, generous, foolish, and rich. And armed with benevolent planes, hydrogen bombs. An American can push anybody off the curb anywhere in the world."

"Not anymore. Not the Russians."

#### 4.

In the spring, in the winter, they come in hundreds to the inland sea, bringing their own water, steaks, liquor, prejudices. In the cooler times, for no albino could live in that scathing basin through July, even though the *totuova* continued to run. For fishing they come, with their Coleman stoves, folding chairs, folding boats, glass rods, skindiving outfits, Kleenex, toilet paper, ice buckets, Band-Aids, canned ham, cameras, binoculars, nesting pots, charcoal, groceries, sun oil, portable radios, cots, pliers, screwdrivers, spotlights, insect lotions, snake kits, battery operated shavers, bottled water, dry ice, wet ice, air mattresses, compasses, boy scout knives, illegal guns, vitamin pills. Virile, red-blooded *Norte Americanos*. Men who, despite affluency, were basically rugged; able to bait their own hooks, able to crank their outboard motors if the starters failed. Able to change a tire if no Mexican boys were available. Able to exist a week or more entirely on the necessities they'd brought along.

From Calexico. From Mexicali, which is divided from Calexico by a street which is the international boundary. Like East Berlin, West Berlin. Good and Evil. Twiddledeedum, twiddledeedee. Before that, from California, Arizona, Idaho, New York, Hawaii. From there—with a running start beginning at some place and terminating in nothing—where a river lay drowned in its ancient silt.

"How about a couple of these here *tacos*, honey," the producer said to the girl.

"Ugh! How do you know they're safe."

On a bicycle, in Hollywood, she had been certain of discovery. Discovery? A handsome man who sold brassieres to the underprivileged. A tall youth who parked cars at Perino's while waiting, waiting. A fat ex-boxer who knew Italian places, a fat banker who papered his rooms with the skins of theatrical promoters. One rainy night she had stepped off the curb, into a Rolls Royce, and out the other side into a taxi. A man raised his hand, the driver skidded. The man had hair under his hat, hair everywhere. But it had been a long ride to San Felipe, and on the third day she stalked among the beached boats, an added luxury for exhausted, squinting eyes, an accessory to be mounted on the prow after motors had been attached, the gear stored. Once affixed, a figurative breeze taking her long, blonde hair, her own prows butted against air's friction at thirty miles per hour, life became a transient thing. But the respite was temporary; there began now, as it did every day, three or four hours of hot, torpid droop. Motionless on the glassy sea, abused by the sun while men pored insanely over their listless lines. This was the part worth telling about after the fact, at a cocktail party in a Neutra house overlooking the city, overlooking everything. "Hal and I just got back from San Felipe or whatever you call it," she would scream into a deaf lighting director's ear, "it was wonderful."

"*Totuova* running?" he would shout. "I say, were the *totuova* running?"

"Fair. Hal got three, but two got away."

The lighting director could see it all from the air.

In a low-flying, private plane, tilting smartly, circling over a

great uselessness of brown, stunted brush. The grotesque piles of scorched mountains where lizards went insane in a few hours, then, suddenly, the vast silver shimmer of that misplaced ocean, and now the jammed rubble of the village. But around it, glistening in myriad colors, the misplaced automobiles with their misplaced occupants. And around the automobiles, cardboard out-houses which had formerly done time as crates for American refrigerators. Small boats made a concentrated, pebbly pattern on the water. None of it remembered the ice age, none of it belonged, and the stench rose to honest heights. A passenger might tap the pilot's shoulder and exclaim, "Jesus—what's all that?" And the pilot would turn and say, "the *totuova* must be running good." The passenger, leaning forward, would say, "What the hell's that—*totuova*?" Large, tarpon-like fish found only in *el golfo*. Something left over from the dinosaurs—something like a cross between white sea bass and mullet. "Jesus," the passenger would say, "all those people camp in that dusty, reeking, ugly place just for that? Jesus!"

Señor Jesús, down below, looking up at the plane, felt filthy with American pesos. Morning, noon, night, they jammed the Cantina. An electric fan, driven indirectly by an ancient Oldsmobile motor, held the flies at bay. Inside, it was gloriously dark. Fishermen's wives stayed and talked unceasingly of curious things. Johnny Hardluck came and went. But he mostly came.

"Why do they call him Johnny Hardluck?"

A blonde girl was asking, and she asked it of her small dog who lay panting and greasy under their marooned station wagon.

"He's a kind of beachnik," the director was saying, "hauls stuck bastards like us out of the sand. Tows boats, takes you down the peninsula 20 miles for Curvina. Picks up a buck here and there—and why not?"

"You didn't answer the question."

"Why they call him *Hardluck*? Because he makes his living off other people's hard luck."

"Don't everybody?"

The girl couldn't act but maybe she didn't have to.

She said, "He's a phony. Why does he wear those soldier suits—the war's over."



"I thought we went through that three days ago. You had it all figured out."

"I know. But you said I was stereotyping him too soon."

With her hair darkened and pulled back severely, and with a prim white blouse and hornrimmed glasses, she could have held her own at half the studios writing dialogue. She was miscast as another all-American wet dream. With her breasts deflated down to fifteen pounds—with a pinstripe suit and a long cigarette holder—

"Maybe it's functional," the director said aloud, "Buying surplus GI clothing. It lasts longer. It's cheaper."

"He could at least shave."

"That's functional, too. It's hard to shave with hard water. I'm starting to grow a beard myself."

"I hadn't noticed."

Considering her youth and attractiveness, she was considerably more frustrated than normal, but why? He had bought her a new pair of shorts for the trip. He had promised that if the deal he was working on ever found a sponsor—

5.

"This place stinks," a large man in hard pants was telling Jesús. "Sí. The people. The fish."

"What do you guys do for food when there's no tourists—I mean, like summer?"

The confounded shrug; the utterly genuine smile.

Yet, this you could believe—Mexicans playing it cool in the sun's torrid downpour. Built-in acceptance; hard, wiry, warped glands hibernating through life itself, propped by a nervous system geared for cows and snails. Tighten your belt. It never hurt—you coasted through on spring's ounce of fat.

Johnny Hardluck putted past in his Jeep, aware through the top of his head that the girl was not unaware of the passing. But of course she would say—that night in the Cantina—"Naturally, I noticed you—who couldn't? A dissolute American gone native. That's why you do it, isn't it?"

Her man friend would say, "Darling! I think you're being too

hard on this kid. How do you know what his motivations are?"

And she would say, "Oh, Hal—are you going to go off on another of your complex philosophies again?"

Like that. Something like that. But in the end, would she or wouldn't she? He placed the odds 56 to 44 in favor, knowing that he was propping himself up with a lie.

"It's too bad there's this stench of fishheads," an oddly white man said redly to his wife as she unpacked. "It could of had some kind of stark beauty if all these humans hadn't messed around." Her reply was drowned by the staccato chatter of an outboard starting up. People wilted here, waiting to go home. The long, straight ride south was bearable; air-conditioned, the radio promising in soft, Mexicali Spanish. There were Catholics and crosses, families and dogs, en route. It ended, though. It became an uninhabited Palm Springs desert with less flora, no fauna. Then, abruptly, you glimpsed the impossible sea. The great, smooth road ceased. You braked before the baked squalor of the village. People looked but there was little curiosity, they'd seen too many of each other. You became another tourist, with another portable outhouse, another trailer to park, another boat to launch. You became more fishheads with no place to bury them, you helped turn the sand into a nasty mess of paper and refuse.

"I kill for food," Johnny Hardluck was saying. "*Americans* kill for sport."

"Which side are you on, Mister?"

"Which do you think?"

Dogs barked, chickens crowed, children screamed, men belowed, motors roared. And the stark, waiting wilt continued, an inescapable glare to be endured until night's short vacation.

"The United States Government ought to take over the whole lower California peninsula and make a resort out of it."

A square man talked to a round one. And a thin one argued with a short one.

The director was talking with a Beverly Hills physician while the girl sat straight and nowhere, scarcely touching her *cerveza* as beer was called here. While he talked, he listened; but when he listened, his thoughts kept going back to Paterson, New Jersey.



Another world, another time. But Paterson kept getting superimposed upon New York and Los Angeles. It was difficult to keep them apart when you were here. The director and the physician discovered that they knew three, no, four of the same people back in L.A. "There's this thing about diplomatic immunity," the physician was saying.

"Yeah. You bet there is."

"You follow what I'm talking about then?"

"I certainly do. The built-in passport. The international key."

"Yeah. With that you can go anywhere, any time. You can pass—"

"Yeah." The director was able to listen again. "Not just pass—more than that. Become a privileged person."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. I mean, really make it. Actors have it of course."

"Yeah—actors. They've transcended politics. Actors and entertainers. They don't have the stigma of nation or creed. They got what every human wants. They provide escape."

"Same thing with priests, too."

"Well—" The physician's restless eyes glanced unlawfully at the long, blonde hair of the girl. "Priests aren't okay everywhere. Some places they stand for the wrong thing."

"But they never hurt anybody. They have no enemies. They're neutrals—"

"Yeah. Even so, in some countries—"

"Doctors have an international passport. They can go any place in the world and be heroes or gods."

"Yeah. Except even there you have certain cults or tribes where a doctor is evil." He emptied the bottle of warm beer. From somewhere above the din came the steady, rolling chug of the Oldsmobile motor on oilstained blocks in back of the Cantina. From somewhere—the sound of gunned outboards, of men shouting, of noisy dogs bluffing one another. To step outside would still be impossible. He had cowered from the withering glare three days now, sipping slowly while the rest of his party cooked their brains aboard an open boat. Only at night did he return to the house-trailer—a crisp, shrunken box that crackled to the touch.



"Don't you fish, Doc?"

"No—I just came along for the—"he waited for words. "For the—"

"Artists have diplomatic immunity!" The director signalled to Señor Jesús, then continued with determined animation. "Painters have got a magic passport. Set up your easel anywhere and the world loves you. Rich old ladies halt their limousines. The poor treat you with respect. Radicals are scared shitless of you! Why?"

"Because you got the world on your side."

"Because you've transcended materialism! Nothing the capitalists or communists can sell you!"

The physician held aloft a thick, soft, white finger.

"But if they're scared of you, you're in trouble."

"They're not really scared because you're a neuter—you fall outside the human race. You're not really a member."

"Poor people aren't members, either."

"What's that?"

"I said, poor people aren't members, either."

"Members of what?"

Suddenly, the girl whirled on her stool. "Who wants to be poor!"

The director altered the color of his voice. "Why, nobody, darling—"

"I ought to know. I *am* poor! I've always been poor!"

The physician noticed that she was a potential thyroid. He saw past her into the pregnant future and felt softly sorry. If she wasn't happy now—with all that—

The boats had returned to the shore. Fishermen were beginning to crowd in pants-deep, bumper to bumper—soft, plump albinos whose dehydration was as yet only skin deep. Men who hogged space just as they hogged fish, liquor, women. Johnny Hardluck hadn't made an appearance yet, he was still jeeping amok among the tents and trailers, looking for something that might be left behind. The girl had seen this and couldn't have been less surprised. He was the women's home companion of every camp ground. She had encountered other members of his species in at least seventeen National Parks while she was married to an elec-

trician who would wind up parking cars at Perino's any day now; a slow, heavy stallion turned loose among the cows while their husbands played the bull market. Johnny was at work, patting little children's heads, older women's bottoms. The way to a married woman's glands was through the children. After all, one thing led to another . . .

## 6.

"They come to San Felipe for the fish," Señor Jesús explained.

Four reckless schoolteachers in a Plymouth sedan had stopped before the salt-watered ground around the Cantina. That, they knew, but they were out for adventure, a kind of post-graduate course in wildness.

"Good swimming," Jesús told them. The Cantina was always open. If not, just walk in and wake him up. And Señor Hardluck would show them where to camp, and how—

"The son of a bitch," the girl said, as the station wagon coughed real dust and the director eased it along the ruts.

"Who, darling—Señor Hardluck?"

"Yeah. He's smelled them down already—look—"

It was true. The Jeep was cruising toward the Plymouth sedan; a lazy, battlescarred, confident shark, tasting the air as it went, certain of the inevitable.

"There'll be a wild time in the old town tonight," the girl said. She didn't look back. She looked into the rear vision mirror where she saw only chapped lips, protected by new lipstick, opened to reveal her biting teeth. Behind and beyond that, stopped in its private cloud of dust, was the Jeep. Its occupant leaned authoritatively toward four women in varying stages of excited helplessness. . . .

The director said nothing. The feel of escape was in his hands, scarcely a hundred yards away, where the asphalt began. Escape and return? He had tried the odor of reality and, for the first time in his life, achieved doubt. He wanted to ask the girl which was which. But reality was a private thing; you never had it for your

own. Reality was the property of someone else; you brought your own sun-goggles. The hot mountains glared back now, pushing the fouled village and its transients into the sea. Scorching winds would come into the open windows soon; how soon he couldn't tell because his watch had stopped and the thermometer was broken. But the stink would travel along with them for some time. Years later, when you opened the memory of San Felipe, a little of it would assail the nostrils. There would be the stinking physician in the stinking bar, talking about diplomatic immunity while hot, soft, wet bodies pushed. He realized, now, that he hadn't said goodbye to the physician. He hadn't said goodbye to Señor Jesús, to Johnny Hardluck, to the limp, sullen girl at his side; nor to the sea, the village, the mountains, the wastes. Was it because he hadn't gone yet? Or because Americans never really left home?

"Where we going when we get back, Hal?"

"Back where? The City?" He glanced at her. Yesterday's grudge was beginning to dissolve into tomorrow's promise. It was the end of the hot war, the cold one. She was going to suggest that, if he drove like mad, they could make it back in time to try a brand new place on La Cienega Boulevard for dinner. They'd try again; Mexico hadn't worked, maybe America would. But he wasn't happy for what he saw; what he knew. He judged their future by her obvious past. It was only fair to ask why. He asked. "Why—?"

"Because—" She extended the pathetic lisp of an old smile that promised newness. "There's a brand new place I heard about that specializes in Mexican food. And it's *very reasonable*—"

The last part was as new as history. But, at least, she hadn't suggested sea-food. He felt the car beneath him slow, then speed up to ninety-two. They could make it all right if he drove like mad—and he was mad. He gave her a new smile that promised oldness and asked, "Does it have a *Cantina*?"



# A View from the Sky



# A View from the Sky

## I.

On Mondays, spoiled swans paddled aimlessly on the public ponds, thinning down for the holidays and pecking mechanically at kleenex, butts, waterlogged sandwiches. Mondays were days whose mornings preceded night, and the nights were far, held off by spears of light from prowlcars inching alleys where rats fumbled one another at the rear of Mayberry Electric. On Mondays, taxpayers placed their children squarely in the paths of frightened motorists, then hurried down and hung up their hats. Women unscrewed their bottletops, they pressed buttons, turned knobs, blew their noses and telephoned people who weren't home, while their water boiled on smokeless ranges. Every clock had a different version. But time came slowly to some places, just as lateness arrived early at others. Monday got ready for Tuesday but it was already four minutes behind by midnight—an uneasy period set aside for positive thinking about survival in a nuclear age.

The town, by a man on a bulldozer, was being pried loose



from its foundations, the dignified past; the past held no future for voters who dwelt in the present tense. The town was a plan—papery and outguessed by progress. It was imagined there by speculators who saw no trees, heard no birds. It was a chart financed by the Chamber of Commerce, nodded by Rotary, pledged by Lions and roamed by Moose. From the sky, it was a crisscross of lines running north and south only to die endlessly among mountains. To the east, streets turned abruptly towards the end of the river, hung there rocking on heels. An airborne public relations man named Eddie, staring straight down through plexiglass, saw water; fresh and salt. He saw tomorrow as glistening, ant-like automobiles and talked directly to city hall and the word was “no.” Under him, everywhere, were newsboys with soaked papers, liquor salesmen with secret address books, cats from broken homes trailed by dogs dragging leashes. Unseen, a girl on the fourth floor of the Martin Building poured bourbon into a paper cup, while policemen winked and blinked, laughed and swore and lost no weight over the unbelievable things teenagers did at night.

The town was golden iridescence sprayed by late summer’s failing sun, it could be starkly dark, with hotness in its hollows and love among the movie theaters. There were songs, hummed tunelessly by deaf-mutes who sold genuine Air Force sun-glasses. There were nude dances in the basement of the Elks Club. People constantly changed clothes, changed their minds, but clung to proven tradition. Citizens were signatures, doubtfully signed in the presence of witnesses impatient to get back to their television sets. Children walked barefoot across grass already visited by unlicensed animals. A wastrel could drive his unpaid-for car over refugee kings and hope for a hung jury. Millionaires ran the risk of eating in the same restaurants as labor union men. Waitresses could look forward to having too many children and a divorced husband living secretly in another state. The town was for a different kind of people all living at the same time. Musclemen worked as custodians; effeminate, wavy-haired youths concealed their sex in stylish trousers and told a great story about the unlimited possibilities of color linoleum for playrooms.

The weak legislated the weak into power and shackled the strong. The strong softened, grew heavy and weak. Financial conquerors wrote rapidly with lifetime pens; fat, tough men who sassed facts and figures. Women listened. Women looked. They looked at themselves in mirrors, in store windows, and men looked after them. Women looked to their husbands but their husbands watched the game. Postal clerks murmured and spat and stamped through the days, marking them off on calendars containing impossible photographs of nude girls, dreaming of a time to retire and raise chinchillas. The town was made for clocks made for women ordained to catch the 12:30 matinee. You were either early or late. There were words of explanation, some true, some false. Everything was explainable. Men without a coin in their pockets were confronted by pay toilets. Bats plunged from four story buildings where they had no civil rights. Lumbermen complained of greenspurting boards riddled with knots; customers complained of cars that pumped oil, children who pumped bikes. And children complained. Their radios failed, within a week after their mothers had taken them down to Mayberry Electric. Electricity failed, even during the Ed Sullivan program. Restaurants failed. Restaurants prospered. Non-Caucasians ate three meals a day. The public accepted it.

The public voted for water, against schools, and for continued prosperity. A woman on the fourth floor of the Shangri-la Arms threw her key to the milkman. A diaper laundry truck ran over a pedigreed dog but the people were conditioned. You live in a town, you accept those things which are of the town. Otherwise, beat it.

"Beat it," a cop told several boys who were plotting against society. But where? Questions lay in the reaching hands of hospital patients, and scientists fed them to machines which would some day rebel. The girl on the bus had never thought of it that way. To her, nothing was so beautiful as an oil painting of a farm thawed by the first rays of sun on a December morning. Nothing so attractive as men in dark suits, turning corners into the wind on long, thin, unathletic legs, their canvas flapping. Men on their way. To elevators. She said, "I like men who go

up and down with their hats off. They tell offcolor business jokes, they order thick, expensive, rare steaks and they can walk out of a restaurant leaving their third martini untouched."

The girl riding beside her was going to have her sofa recovered. She said, "What this town needs is an up-to-date monorail transit system."

The town? By a man on a bulldozer was being pried loose from the taxpayers. Trees toppled, birds unsprung themselves against the sky; hills were gashed, boulders smashed. And under it, all of it, under it, an umbrella of dust made carburetors cough; romance hesitated upon the threshold of gritty thighs, round pistons pounded into polished cylinders, tended by men who drank. Civilization had been squirted there from the speculative pen of some man with a plan whose trouser-bottoms were prematurely old and wrinkled. Men had speared topography, crisscrossed it with lines that ran north and south, and then turned right and ended abruptly against the river. Streets started out paved with promise, only to roam endlessly and die among the mountains. And there, a dynamite man had launched a thousand birds with a plunge of his detonator. Half the mountain came down in small pieces, and Standard Oil built another service station with clean, modern restrooms where an Indian had died.

Man with a detonator, man with a bulldozer, man with a contract. Man with another man; both married. Fathers. Members of.

Both heavy. With legs. Like tapered pistons? Low-slung, powerful, rotund, quick with a pencil and paper. Driving dusty new cars, driving their polished shoes into the raw earth. Feet apart, conferring under twin brown hats. Blueprints. Ball-points, Armpits. They were men who could go. Into old apartment houses. Leaking gas sifted through their bank books. Termites roared—they heard that too. They sensed falling plaster, they forecast rain, coming through the roof and finding its way into overflowing basements. They ran sturdy fingernails across corrupt foundations. They counted the rings on ceilings and then calculated age. Their noses pointed mildew, froze on Death's gilt edge, knowing the difference between financial suicide and a coroner's certificate. They removed their twin black books from their twin



buttocks and opened them. Each of them wrote the word "No," and called on the building inspector. The building inspector was a Rotarian but he still had to go through the formalities. Landlords wept, tenants shrieked, dogs barked. Landlords joined the Lion's Club but it was too late then. The bulldozer had already been told to report on Tuesday.

Goats and cows were being torn down all over that summer to make room for automobiles. Glassy apartment houses with deep, filtered ponds lay over the cemeteries. Artificially induced laughter ricocheted against windows where lights had been left on. People wet themselves inside and out and made love in numerous unacceptable ways. The town was growing, there would be a need for more people to fill it with. The more town, the more consumers, and the more consumers, the more jobs. The girl, on her way to have her watch repaired, saw the bulldozer. It had a man on it. She wondered how he would look in an elevator, hat removed? She passed 328 F Street, a stucco with a mustache of tile under its upstairs window. She passed between that and a 1956 Ford registered to Mayberry, George P. Beyond her lay the United States of America, most of it packaged; most of it tuned in. Somewhere, men swung handfuls of bats and waited for it to start. The operator of the bulldozer was tuned in, maintaining direct contact at all times through a transistor radio with ear-plugs. Mayberry fixed them—radios. And he went quite often.

To the bowling alley? Alone?

"Not by choice!" His mother had revealed this to his sister, most recently disengaged from a philandering sand & gravel man. "Why?" the sister blew her nose and examined her handkerchief for signs.

Mayberry? Put him beside a razorlipped trumpet player and you've heard music for the first time. She was heavier, the girl—the other girl, and had worked at Walgreen's until one night, late, when a gentleman came in to buy liquor.

"Oh, the face?" She smiled into her pocket mirror for reassurance. "Two goat's eyes strung apart like distant lanterns. Against an eternal span of innocence. And the mouth—wondrous,

circling the oh's and ah's with the unspoiled zero of astonishment. Put him beside—"

"Put who beside?"

"George Mayberry." Imagination had carried on where reality died, waiting until the trumpet's sweet call could spell it out.

The air overhead was cloudblessed and perforated with electronic impulses that would some day turn commercial. Germs splatted against the carefully scrubbed faces of fashion models. Kelp flies dove suicidally into stinging bulbs. Everywhere, animals and vegetables were busy at becoming the ultimate mineral. Glue factories flourished where rubber companies had fallen before the muscular hammers of cattle dispensaries. There was a busy sky; bombers, jets, kites, balloons, birds, zeppelins and airliners jammed with drinking fatalists. Wisps of cellophane climbed high, shot there by unrecorded tornadoes. Sound waves traveled back and forth from earth to stratosphere, bringing censored reports on the progress of civilization. The air was flagellated by smokes, colored by acids and grits, licensed by both the Federal Communications Commission and the Civil Aeronautics Bureau. Private planes spun dizzily from low altitudes; parachutists raced each other to the ground and the winners never lived to tell. And finally, the whole extravaganza—the turbulent air and all its alien accessories—was homogenized by helicopters that were sprung into the sky by drunken commanders whose girlfriends dated younger lieutenants.

"Look," said George Mayberry's mother, "would you want your sister to marry a steamfitter?"

"Why not? They're no different from anyone else when you get to know them."

He was blowing ants out of his picnic. Now he looked, and, seeing no sky, got no God; only the condensed purple sweat of people. And their transparent ghosts. Of history? Drifting among the languid currents where bored airpassengers glanced straight through, and down, and saw absolutely nothing. His mother was going to say, "Some of my best friends are steamfitters," unless he could thrust a tongue sandwich into her mouth. She was thinner, and recommended Elizabeth who was heavier. Her lips

shaped themselves innocently around a cucumber-sized pickle; he thought of Sigmund Freud and then remembered he had forgotten to turn off the light down at the shop.

"Some of my best friends are steamfitters," his mother said suddenly; "your father associated with them." Absently, she flung a shred of lettuce to a snail that steamed slowly toward them, leaving a glistening wake on the blanket. "*Quite publicly, darling.*"

Little had happened after that. A town was old and hollow on Sundays, slowed to a dead stop by Jesus and the money-changers.

"Can you change fifty cents?" the girl was asking, because the bulldozer operator sat hotly upon an ant hill in the shade, his lips pressed against a milk carton upon which were printed the sad, soulful eyes of Bessie-Lou, winner of twenty gold medals.

"I only got five bucks. Sorry."

"What are they going to build here?"

"*Building* I guess."

"I'm fifteen. My old man's a tycoon." She tried out her new legs, tan and well formed in shorts. "Does that radio really work?"

"Battery's dead." He was watching hard, held back by reason. Five years for five minutes fun. In another state, in another time, in another country, yes. In a better world under newer skies. Yes.

"You ought to see George Mayberry. He fixes everything if they're radios."

The town balanced upon the edge of the river, its feet wet, some of it falling in and drowning, and petroleum companies bored into the ground, took out money and erected towers that shot into the sky, to terrify amateur pilots. Buildings kept losing their balance, kept inching over to tramp out houses and trees while engineers with slide rules twitching from their khaki pants pockets took sightings and sweated, propped up by Coca-Colas, quietly talking back to financiers. They were the law. They were neutrals, operating amorally within the delicate strata of sociology. They removed their hats when they went up and down in elevators, but they weren't tall enough, nor dressed in black, and they smelled at five o'clock. The girl whose name was Char-



lotte instinctively knew this, at the same time wishing she were Alice Trent or Mrs. John Kennedy. To George Mayberry she turned, on Monday, and said, "Would you want your daughter—if you had a daughter—to marry a city councilman?"

"Why not? They're no different than anyone else."

"I thought you'd say that. I can always tell what you're going to say. This town's really had it." She turned her back and leaned an elbow on the counter so that it touched a dead tube from her grandmother's table model Philco. She noticed the calendars on the wall—an ice-skating girl in ear-muffs for January, a girl wearing a firecracker for July. June was absolutely naked except for two bands of fur, and grasping a fly-rod. Three goldfish bubbled apathetically inside a square tank that was squeezed on its shelf by the exoskeletons of dozens of radios. A bee bonged its head incessantly against the window where there was a sign that said, "Out to lunch. Had your tubes checked recently?" She was restless, helpless, ill at ease. You came into shops and there was nothing to understand, no interesting thing. You waited. And made conversation. And lit a cigarette and said, "Think there'll be a war?"

Mayberry shrugged. He had seen city councilmen do it and a thing like that didn't take so much out of you.

"You want to know what the gas station boys think about it?"

"Well—what do the gas station boys think when they think? If they do—think."

"They think there won't be any."

"How do they know?"

"They meet a lot of people." She said it with mother's omnipotent chide. "They get around—"

They darted around in their starched white uniforms pumping Boron into mothers and daughters, exclaiming over filthy oil, warning the populace of the great robberies being performed day and night by old sparkplugs. But then, *did* they? *Know?* He, usually, went to the wrestling matches. Alone. Not by choice. Because. He didn't give a damn about anybody. Because. Not anybody gave a damn about him. People. People who met Mayberry didn't seem to remember, they just didn't seem. To remember. . . .

He thought of his glands as small jellyfish, paddling ineffectually against the tide, losing years in a great backward drift while zealots in outboard motorboats crisscrossed the local sea, furrowing the kelp, decapitating fish. His sorrow was an elephant moving obediently into the jungle, ponderously swinging its things, prodded by naked girls wearing spike heels while men planned a life. It was neither a time nor a place to be born anonymous. His name would be found in an old telephone book centuries later. That would be his sole effect on destiny. The world owned him a great crime, he had it coming. He got, instead, arrogant women in stationwagons filled with explosive children who came in and turned everything on and off and on and off. While their mothers protested unconvincingly. Mothers with sick radios, supreme in the knowledge they would be overcharged, whittling an inch off the bill with ninety cents worth of exposed breast. A wriggle, a smile, a lowered lid.

Where was the flown bird upon which his destiny so delicately perched? He once asked a waitress who gave confidential tips to men who left a quarter on the counter. It was a line he had picked up unconsciously while soldering a condenser onto an old Zenith. "You seen one and you seen them all," she had told herself truthfully, and squirted chocolate syrup into somebody's strawberry malt. She had felt the man in the bulldozer, that wistful fall afternoon when shorebirds stood upon one foot and the other, awaiting the long shadows of unfulfilled resolution. And his chest, the man's, was a sagging expanse of eroded mudpies, held together by greying hairs you could count. The mood was almost redundant with power and sound, all of it under a jaunty umbrella while his little chimney popped black smoke. Autumns were her spring; they wore sex's great sad throb, told by the glistening, windless bay. It was a time when telephones exploded in your hand. Wrong numbers, yes—but people had to call, people wanted to ask, to tell. They murmured quietly in the heat and chill of shadow or sunlight, expecting bombs to drop; expecting earthquakes, love, significance. Men! Instead of swinging at balls they twitched to kicking. TV came on with renewed life, determined to try again. You stopped chewing gum in the fall.

"Black smoke don't belong with diesels," Eddie had told her before he started hanging around coffeehouses; "why, half the diesels you see are hogging fuel. It's a crime. Nobody knows a goddamned thing about anything any more." They had been sitting in his 57 Olds not more than inches apart and his hand was climbing.

She sat quite still. She said, "George Mayberry says the gas station boys don't think it will ever really happen. War."

"What's so fascinating about this guy in the bulldozer?"

"He made all-American tackle at University high. Just works summers."

Precisely as she said this, the two men in brown suits and brown hats were drilling their tapered legs into the deep carpet in the silent office of Robertson, Warne, McAuliffe, Thomas, Frye & Appleyard. One of them leaned forward and said, "Look, Al, it's twelve twenty-two."

The other leaned back and brought his wrist up to within a foot of his serious eyes. "I've got just twelve twenty-one, Charley J—"

The other hesitated. There was a time to be shrewd, a time to be outgoing and friendly. He could hear the bulldozers now, plowing up mountains of gold leaf that would be converted into elaborate chains of hamburger stands. He could smell dollar bills, fives and tens, crumpled with the flavors of chewing gum, powder and perfume. Women. Young girls. Spoiled, gangling, sullen boys with wolf eyes and unformed faces, behind the wheels of their fathers' cars, sipping thick drinks. Putting thick drinks into one end of the girl and hoping against hope for the other.

"Well, Charley J—?"

There was no doubt about it. He quickly stood up, peeled back his sleeve and shook hands.

The other shook. Hands—

"We ought to talk to this fellow Mayberry."

"We certainly ought to."

"We could talk to him and tell him."

"Right! Talk to him and tell him."

"Right! Tell him and talk him."



"Right."

"Right."

"Slowly, each had been backing away. But now one of them realized that the other was at a disadvantage; he had gone just about as far as he could go without stepping out the window, and it was a seven-story drop. Curiosity quickly overpowered him. He stood still for a second, then began again. "Right! We'll talk to this fellow Mayberry and tell him." He waited.

The other stood there, bewildered and undecided. And then like a mean animal he turned and came menacingly toward the other and said, "Al, I don't *know*! There's something *about* it! I don't like! I don't *know*!"

Directly below them, but on the second floor, the girl poured a stiff shot into a Dixie cup and hated herself for being afraid to come without stockings. You could come and go, but nobody really ever cared if you came. They only said! They did! She remembered the unhung backyard of her father's vegetable garden; green worms that squished to the touch, framed in the triangular shadow of the Richfield tower. He had been a submarine tender, had been accused of stealing cannons. Thereafter her mother took to chaining her airedale to the bar stool at Louie's Canteen at eleven o'clock every morning where she gave and received beers with the worst of them.

"George Mayberry's probably the kind that would diddle little children."

Unable to recall where or when. She had picked up the magical phrase. But it remained top-drawer in her mind, fresh as the day it was made. More exciting than television, more sinister than the bomb. She struck a match for her boss's cigarette. The open window brought life and death and a bumblebee, far above its altitude. It brought the bulldozer, grinding the filthy vacant lot, and men with neckties and blueprints who remained tuned by transistor radios to the ball game while they worked. They stood with their pantscreases knifing into the wind while a crewcut college boy stopped and squinted into a telescope and flapped his arms. Progress was a balloon to be shot down by Reds; it was China waking up while England fell asleep, it was strawberries

and chrome for breakfast. Buildings were being torn down to make room for cars, people were growing up two sizes larger and then, suddenly, buying compact cars. It was seeing how big you could make everything up to some undefined point, and then re-tooling and re-advertising to see how small. Except wrist-watches. Wristwatches had never tried to be bigger than each other but. Maybe they would, now. And transistor radios. They would get smaller and smaller until one day they would start to get bigger and bigger.

"Americans can't make up their minds," Walter Groves said.

George P. Mayberry overheard him. He was standing just a foot away at the time.

"It's love of change," Groves continued, and one eye fell dangerously upon the ice-skating girl for January. "Change! And what is change? Escape! And what is escape? Refusal to face your environment!"

"I swatted sixteen flies this morning," Mayberry said. "I hate to do it. Perhaps if I just held the right thought—"

His voice had tricked him again. It was a child's daydream, uttered aloud in total solitude, the final wisp of smoke from the last bonfire of the season.

"What is progress?" Groves said. "Hauling a load of gravel to a wrong address and dumping it! Calling up people you don't know on the telephone! Hanging by your knees on the Ed Sullivan show. Cutting down the trees and remodelling your store front. People eat it up, they eat it up."

If you held the right thought, Mayberry theorized, the flies would stay outside. Some super-intelligence would hit them like radar. They'd get as far as the doorway and turn around and go back. Or, look at it! From an evolutionary standpoint! All the flies that didn't have enough sense to stay where they belonged would be killed. Eventually, the only survivors would be flies that were the descendants of flies that stayed outside. But it hadn't worked. Yet. . . .

"There's no flies on Linus Pauling," Groves said. "That man's the intellectual's pin-up boy." Again he was aware that his eye had been going over everything in the room, trying to play the



objective observer. But it kept getting stuck on the body of the pin-up girl for January. Why was January better than June?

Flies always lighted on Mayberry's forehead when attractive women came in to have him check their tubes. He had an uncle who fixed flats on the highway between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. There you got scorpions and tarantulas instead. Same thing; if you killed all the scorpions that came indoors, then only the ones that liked to stay outdoors would carry on the race.

"I got a couple of fins planted on the fifth race at Bay Meadows," Groves said.

George Mayberry said, "Golly, think of that, I'll be damned."

"Horse called 'Tarantula's Dance'!" Groves was making ready to cast off his lines, inch away from the dock. He had full steam up. His propellers were treading water. He gave three short blasts and they shuddered with life. "Bye now!" He began to glide majestically toward the door, out into the hotly sunned sidewalks where other passengers would have to alter their courses. The crowds waved. Bands played. "I take it back what I said," he called by ship-to-shore telephone. "It was all talk. There aren't any pin-up boys any more. All talk! I never know what to do with my hands when I have to stand and wait around."

Mayberry picked his teeth with a piece of copper wire and watched and waited. He thought, "Survival of the fittest. If you killed off all of them that came inside like that, then maybe the only people to survive would be the ones that stayed out." But it wouldn't be good for business.

## 2.

The town re-called all of its streets. They were too narrow, too long. It gave the sidewalks back to the people and planted four new trees for every hundred it cut down. A mountain got in the way and had to be eaten alive. The bay was too shallow, because ships got too big. Children wrote poems on the walls of abandoned sewage tunnels and publishers waited for them to grow up. Inflation came to penny parking meters and a Negro family moved into the Alta Terrace subdivision the same day George



Mayberry installed fluorescent lighting. "Where is the hushed bird upon which my destiny pegged a wrong number?" Mayberry asked himself, and scratched them. In high school a girl had signed his yearbook, then moved in with a sailor without returning his class ring. Train whistles agonized his sleep as he lay on an iron cot under an apartment with a phonograph that constantly played "Hound Dog Man." He had once gone into the shrubbery with a stenographer from Ace Plumbing, but he was unable: there were too many crickets, police sirens, false alarms. Women who were hot and damp dried up for him, discovering platonic virtue in his hungry eyes. He was a driver's license good for one year. Paint fell upon him from ladders upon which men perched and apologized profusely. Traffic lights changed as he stepped from the curb. Whatever he ordered in restaurants, they were just fresh out of, hadn't had time even to cross it off the menu. His doorbell never rang; when it did, it was the Fuller Brush man wanting the little lady of the house. The comics were torn and shredded when the Sunday paper arrived. Dogs went crazy when he walked past their yards, children threw stones at each other and hit his car. Little girls hung by their knees in front of him while their mothers watched suspiciously. In the bank, he always got in the wrong line, behind someone with ten thousand pennies to deposit. At some point, he stepped recklessly to another line, where an exacting, doddering woman had discovered an error in her deposit book. Mockingbirds pulled his hair. The drinking fountain suddenly went off as he bent thirstily over it. He was always getting airmail letters addressed to Bill Miller, 23,909 Woodland Terrace. In some other city. . . .

On the Fourth of July, the Senatorial candidate from the left side of town declared, "I think of myself as the voice of the little man—the chronic failure, the unequivocal jerk. Society is built upon its weakest link. So long as there's one single jerk running around, the Cadillac dwellers aren't safe."

"He's pretty wild isn't he?" Charlotte said to the man who, before removing his hat, and the mud, had been operating the bulldozer.

"Something's got to be done for the people who haven't got it or they'll become a bit of a nuisance."

"We got a pretty good big little old police force in this town. My sister's married to a rookie right this minute." He could see her, plated with mink stepping from an airliner into the arms of some man who fixed radios. She had just been to Las Vegas with a couple of old boys in brown suits and hats. Heavy men who wanted a little fun. She wouldn't have wanted her sister to marry a steamfitter. They drank. And steam was giving way to electricity.

She said, "That's the trouble with the world—too many delinquents in proportion to the number of people."

The world was the honked sadness of unpaid-for Pontiacs, passing in the dark while cops in space helmets watched out for sex that came after football games. The world was a Chamber of Commerce dream of water for everyone, a dream of towns, themselves. Cemeteries bought billboard space to announce; "Die Now—Pay Later." Midgets were charged the same price as giants because all people were believed to be the same size when dead. Men flashed credit cards at skeptics, and skeptics urinated on civic lawns in plain sight on dark nights. Streetcar tracks were the poor man's chrome, polished a hundred times a day while lunatics cursed themselves in downtown alleys. Mrs. Mayberry caught the 11:30 matinee of *Hercules Unchained*, then blew herself to the 89-cent special plate at Walgreen's where the counter girls chewed gum in unison and bleached their hair different shades. Young, soft, selfcentered men pumped more Boron into the tanks of mothers who had to drive their children cross-town for shots, then to the beach, then to the donkey ride in the valley, and then to frosty freezes and then to the barbershop and then to music lessons and then to a party and then to the movies. It all helped. Putting money. Into circulation. And; the more money, the more rubbed off on you and anybody else. Young men greased Chevrolets and looked forward to the night when they might. Find a girl who. Would.

One August morning when barbecues were moving fast, the girl who had worked at Walgreen's until a gentleman came in

to buy liquor turned to her father and said, "Why don't you get a job working with missiles?"

"Sure, daughter," he told her. He wore an oilstained shapeless hat low over his eyes and sat on park benches where he read discarded newspapers. But he had been a warehouse watchman in his time, lugging a .45 and turning on his flashlight frequently.

"Missiles are the big thing now. You ought to turn up your hearing aid and learn what's going on."

"Maybe I could get it fixed over at Mayberry's."

"Mayberry never fixed a thing yet, Dad." She took three pins out of her mouth. "His equipment is absolutely obsolete. He ought to be driving a bulldozer or something, I'm sorry."

Her father was already completely disconnected from life. He was remembering chilled November mornings when they hunted ducks where the Bank of America now stands. The sun came up in colors, the ground was new, youthful, just starting. And in the exploring gray fingers of light, every shrub, every tree, took upon itself the magical promise of mystery. And crows called the day from wild lanes among the oaktrees; deer raised delicate hooves from a rippled mirroring of sky and quail exploded everywhere under the mudcaked oversized rubbers of men with double-barreled shotguns. The land had a smell, it knew how to remain quiet. There were no sheriffs in fat, black cars, no game wardens, no subdivisions flying flags, no streets, no buildings, no people, no crisscrossed skies with mysterious boomings.

"There's money in missiles," she said.

"They tore up the streetcar tracks and converted to buses," he answered. "I never could figure why."

"Lots of people can't get cleared to work in missiles. You could, Dad."

He looked at her, somebody else's daughter living in a house he didn't own in another part of the world. "I bet Mayberry could fix Grandma's old B-battery set, daughter. We used to get Amos and Andy every damn night."

"Why don't you go out to the missile base and see if there's anything for you to do?"

"I will." Uncertainly he got up from the bench. "And I'll ask him if he can do anything about my hearing aid, too."



George Mayberry came to work late, left early, and drove the two blocks to Edith's Drive-Inn several times a day for coffee-break. He knew that people committed suicide leaping from curbsings. He wondered if it were actually true that male contortionists were completely self-sufficient. He agreed that there weren't enough birds to go round; that taxpayers had no place to hide; that heavy women teetered on slick sidewalks in their high heels when fog was a wrap-around cloak bringing ache to the bones. He thought of cemeteries where owls perched disconsolately, longing for fewer moons, more rodents. His ears lied to him about caged musicians peeling off the forbidden hours on corroded old saxophones while crew-cut high school students nodded their heads helplessly and polished their glasses. His own moustache was a sieve, straining kisses from myopic fat women who shot their husbands. "Radios is okay," he told mother, "I pull down my three seventy-five an hour and that's not to be sneezed at."

She coughed. "Sure, son. Better than being a steamfitter and you can say that again."

"Steamfitter," he said.

They blew their noses now, sharing the same handkerchief just as they cooperated about bathrooms, lovers, and the *Reader's Digest*. He pulled out his soldering iron and laid it lovingly on his plate. She pulled a batch of green stamps from somewhere among her bosoms and dunked them into her coffee which she took weak. Then she excused herself to go out and vote for Jack. Everyone was. Doing it this year.

"What?" he asked suddenly, and there was purple cunning on his lips.

"Why running. For President, dear."

"I'd better run," he said, "I'll miss the bus." But it was a lie, almost three years old, for he had a Ford, almost. Paid for. Almost—

"Charlotte's a sweet, big, lovable little old youngster," his mother called without dialing a number.

"She kills goldfish!"

"Only when they become a nuisance, son."

"I'd rather marry Jane or Sue Ellen or Aggie Wells."

"You did." She was ironing green stamps onto the pages. "And where are they now?"

"Shall I call and find out?"

A tear fell from his mother's right eye. Girls worked themselves to the bone saving themselves for sons old enough to be their fathers, and yet too young to watch late television programs. A mother was hamstrung without a laundromat and a pint of bourbon. Prefabricated houses told a big lie about heat insulation. Civil engineers thought they could measure domestic problems on their slide rules. Fathers secretly spent their overtime pay on outboard motorboats and then never caught a goddamned thing.

"Mother—I think I'll get me one of these here little outboard motorboats. Girls are crazy about water skiing." He noticed that she had gone and gotten butter all over the ice-skating girl on the sports page. He could read the type on the reverse side, backwards, but instead he remembered the roller-rink where girls in black leather jackets danced dirty to a Hammond electric organ with tall, pimpled boys with sideburns who would take a long, long time getting them home. Ice-skaters were purer but they had mothers. Women who bowled got hungry afterwards. Dark, handsome men went up and down with their hats removed but some going bald already. They usually carried three pens and a notebook and knew who was winning the game. Girls who went water skiing also got hungry afterwards. . . .

"There's no way out," his mother told herself and opened the back door.

The town? Was built. Of walls within walls.

Envious of its rotting shores where ships sat fat and calm, certain of escape. The people reached for the stinging bleat of sea gulls; they had no sand between their toes. Athlete's foot grew where adventure started. Shoe clerks never got above the knee; they longed for country air.

At 328 F Street was a power lawnmower purchased from Sears for a ridiculously low downpayment. But Sunday. Was for polishing. Cars. Bulldozers snored at their jobs while women in hats tiptoed through deep dust on mysterious errands. There were more trees on Sunday, fewer typewriters. Letter carriers



took long, fast walks. Bus drivers drove. Businessmen talked business and landscape painters worked as ushers in movie houses. Squirrels came suddenly to earth and removed sandwiches from screaming children. Mumbling old men completely disappeared under clouds of pigeons. Caucasians leaned against pilings already touched by non-Caucasians down at the docks, fishlines tied round their fingers while they dreamed of retirement. The forest called but nobody saw the trees. Families plummeted down the highways in search of absolutely nothing, found it, then turned around and became vaporlocked in traffic jams. A dress-shop proprietor walked past George Mayberry's Radio Repair Shop on the way to a drug store that would sell all of the goddamned sleeping pills anybody could want. An irritated wind whisked the gutters to shove beer cans, kleenex, and various kinds of rubber, shredded or frayed.

"Bye now." The phrase was good for workdays at quarter to eight. George Mayberry backed his Ford out of the garage and almost ran over a civil engineer. He quickly put the car into forward gear, re-entered the garage and closed the door.

"Hello again," his mother said, "back so soon?" She was knitting a pair of diapers, in case she, or George, or anybody.

"I left early," he told her, "business was dead."

"That's because it's Sunday—because your shop's closed."

"Yeah.

"I wish somebody would invent an electric shaver that didn't need electricity."

"Yeah." He had his anchor up. The crowds were throwing confetti. You'd have thought he'd won the war singlehandedly. Yet. His mother. Was completely unaware of the time, the moment. She had a dead short in her somewheres. "Bye now!" he called.

"Going out again already?"

"Yeah. Johannesburg, South Africa."

"Better take some candy bars. You'll get hungry." She got up and started to bake a cake. "Driving, son?"

"What's it to you?"

"Don't forget to get air for the tires, it's pretty hot there."



He backed the Ford out of the garage once more. His mother backed out of the kitchen, shaking her fist. It angered her on Tuesdays to have produced a son good only on Thursday; retarded for his size, and under age for his years. In a smaller community, he would have made Village Idiot; here, they let him play around with his tubes and wires as if he were only a gorilla under glass. She could think clearly back to the time when rich, wild cousins from Eureka had taken her to the Hollywood Bowl to hear Kate Smith and Leo Stokowski. All of them opened their zippers when they went to the bathroom. It didn't run in the family. She should have married a jockey, there were few cases of insanity among jockeys. She broke an egg into a cup and wondered why. Always, there were filthy cousins, a Christian Scientist aunt, a large Catholic family whose washing hung in plain view of neatly dressed young insurance men. And daughters to be married off. Sons. Who missed Mass. She was secretly related to President Eisenhower by a curious sequence of love affairs going back to her great-great-grandfather who was famous with a putter. She was thinner than most fat people; turnstiles in supermarkets barely moved when she passed through them, laughing. Fat people were wider but not very deep, and looked short no matter how tall.

"Ford's a great big little old car," George shouted as he backed over a frog, honking at a hummingbird which was flying recon over the shrubs.

"Don't go over fifteen, darlin'."

"Why, mother!"

He remembered his soldering iron, on his breakfast plate between two half eaten eggs buried in chocolate syrup. And the slice of twice-eaten canteloupe. He always ate the canteloupe first, then his mother got a spoon and started over again, digging deeply. There would never be anyone else like her. Each time he married, she left the bedroom light on for him, covers turned back. Because. She knew. Sooner or later. . . .

"I hate Mother," he had told his first wife on their third night.

"Give your poor old mother a French kiss and she'll be happy," a voice said. It was mother all right, planted firmly between him-

self and the marmalade jar. "They're building a new building down at the lot next to Walgreen's," he told her, kindly but firmly. "Bye now."

He was backing out of the garage but part of him still hung around in the kitchen because his soldering iron lay there on his plate. Without looking he could see it; he was certain that if he turned the Ford around and drove 85 feet and parked, and then went back and opened the kitchen screendoor he would see the two half-eaten eggs. And his wallet containing the photograph of Jayne Mansfield and her new baby. Was it a boy or girl?

"Anyone ought to be able to tell that," someone seemed to scoff.

"What?" he asked, and then assured himself quickly, "It's me, mom, only me. I forgot my rubbers."

"But it's not raining."

"Yeah, I know."

"That boy has a head on his shoulders," his mother told no one within hearing.

"What boy?"

"Dicky Nixon."

Some men had heads on their shoulders, others had shoulders under their heads. Hardly half a million were licensed radio technicians to whom beautiful girls came running helplessly in need of tubes. Once a city-councilman came in with a totally dead Magnavox and took off his hat. "Radios laugh at a king," George told him sympathetically.

He realized that he had been running in reverse for several blocks. It was unlawful, and yet it was a good way to see where you'd been before you got there. And also. It was like humming-birds which were absolutely incredible in reverse. But going. Forward. They were nothing but regular little tiny airforce jets flying without instruments. Never needed soldering.

"Charlotte!"

"Tom!"

He braked suddenly. A girl he knew only as Mary Jane was walking backwards down the sidewalk. She stopped. She started to walk forward in order to move backwards toward him. At the



same time, he put the car in forward gear in order to get back to where he hadn't been.

"I'm George," he told her.

"My name's Alma, as any fool knows."

"Hi. Going my way?"

She waited, uncertain which way either of them was going. Then she said, "You ran over a frog."

"I'm sorry, Honest—"

"It's okay. It was already run over last week."

"This town's full of frogs."

"I know. There was one the other night." Her eyes looked at him beautifully. He had never, really, existed.

"Where?" he asked. "Get in."

"Down where they're bulldozing that lot. I'm going the other way—" She started to walk backwards in a forward direction.

He said, "There was a fire last night but I didn't go. Too busy."

In the other half of the town, the part that was to the left of right, the heavy man named Charley fanned himself with a brown hat and said, "It's quarter past two, Al. Read about that radio repairman this morning?"

"Wasn't that something?" The other watched a tall insurance salesman in a black suit, turning a corner into the wind. There were two kinds of people; those who would, and those that only wanted to. "It'll be a pretty messy business when all the details are made known."

"His mother claims he was always a well behaved boy." He put his hat back on and started to go down. The girl would be on the second floor, pouring herself another straight one into a Dixie cup. She had it coming, she was a thin sloop, tacking into the wind without a compass, her canvas flapping, a double reef in her underthings. She would walk home listing dangerously, her bilges foul. She was a mouse feeling some animal's triumphant roar, feeling it through her skin, trembling. Knowing. But too late. "Only the fit are fit to survive," he whispered to the old lady standing next to him, "let me off at men's furnishings, wherever the hell that is."



# The Personalized Man





# The Personalized Man

Last night, again, it seemed to happen. Somewhere? Near the forest's edge. And trees—bowing and scraping; All of that sound, with waves moaning, and the birds irked. A screech was a scream and the shout was thunder. All of it. Riding wild at full throttle, so that a road came and went in jittery darkness, so that if it seemed to happen again it could have? Couldn't have? As though in wetness men's numbed minds floated upon the slick and waited for yesterday's return?

"I am anybody. Anywhere. Any time."

This was, of course, his testament. Kill him—yes. But an idea? An idea?

It seemed like it. Happened. Near a forest's edge; there, deep among shredded branches, brambles, tangles. Drowned things, and the stinking swamp with an incessant zing of insects; the eye seemed to meet an eye, staring from tangled foliage. One was watched, totally, at all times. And heard; even one's thoughts were oral, and wrongness was smelled. An owl's honk was a fox-bark in there, the wind—ever whittling out a prologue. While. Overhead (but you merely knew it) a lover's sky, ridden through



by white ghosts of rain. Told. By a new moon. Spring was the time, and wild. You could have experienced Hitler in there.

Hello, you said, you said, hello.

A hundred of answers, all dead.

They did it to you—back in the small towns where Rotarians throw up a cordon to keep out vagrant ideas. Did it to you. Anywhere, any time. Any time at all, now. . . .

Others from the old crowd had. Had it. F. McReady, felled by a Buick in '43. Miss J—, caught her index finger in a typewriter key; complications. But others? Clung to life as though it were the only thing they ever owned. Others continued to avoid thunderbolts. Sidestepped bullets on windy afternoons. Refused to stand under collapsing buildings. Then. Why Leadmann? Leadmann was highly personalized.

I mention last night.

Perhaps it was. The. Last night.

Rain!

And the waitress from Erny's Tavern. Seen alone. Moving towards employment.

Rain! Rain? Rain—first, the casual inch, falling against earth in utter boredom. Now animation, as it began, slowly, to know. That it. Was going to try for a new record. A bucket filled itself and then ceased to care any more. The small lake, which prevented the forest from growing into the sea—it raised itself high enough to see out. And the lake's tenants swam into the holes of squirrels, crazed by newness and the skydropped oxygen, and a wildcat backed inchingly uphill, thinking in dismal anger. Rain? Ants up a stick walked four deep upon one another. Condensed. By a shrinking world. And dozens falling off as others dug beneath in that harsh, loving, fulminating, decisive hot May dark which was. Last night. When again. It seemed to—happen. F. Leadmann. . . .

Down in the bushes. *Again!* Totally wet, and unlike any other animal except the drowned. Observing. Shrieking. Laughing like an owl with a mouse up its ass. In the wind's safe roar. Teasing trees. Rubbing the wrong way—grass. Biting buds off plants hopeful in their first puberty. Munching poison oak leaves and

then. Sticking a snail. To his cheek. And feeling it—glide on its saliva cushion across his violated skin. Or, imprisoning a minnow in his mouth until the last calculated moment of life, then spitting it back into the pond.

"I never joined any Parties," he had said, "too busy."

Not last night; some other night.

They said he was too much of everything, crammed inside one body, packed beneath a single skin. A thick skin. That was his trouble—too many in one. An accident of birth; descended from millions of years of misbreeding. People had tried, only to wind up becoming his ancestors. They'd gone around having babies for history and ended up with this. But more than just people! Leadmann predated people, for there was elephant in him, and mice, and fish, and a heron flapping disconsolately over a lake, searching for fish. He was a vulture picking carrion, a rat cracking its young, a sparrow following horses for pickups, a horse pulling a man, a man pulling a dog. How? I think he did it by stern, conscious effort. He cultivated a remembrance clear back to plant algae. And on that night he *was* plant algae, thinking forward to pollywogs.

"You have got. To do more. Than *think* pollywogs. You have actually got to be! Be! Be!"

It happened then.

However improbably, he lowered himself into the hot scum, then lay floundering on the edge, gasping among the mosses, wriggling ineffectually. Leadmann's girlfriend, who'd come along, confided later that it was a magnificent sight. "He does it so *well*! I could *feel* his pollywog!"

"You could?" I asked, confounded.

"Could what?"

"Feel his pollywog?"

She blushed with a grimace of recognition. As though. Definitely caught. In a grammatical disaster containing suggestive possibilities.

Girlfriend? Somehow, in Leadmann, the choice of the word implies that there might also be boyfriends. *Who*—knew? You learned a girl for each purpose, and for each purpose a differing

friend. "In order to live forever—which I shall," he told it, "a man must go around being everything. Except. Himself." A bird—a fish—a stone. But you'd had all that.

She was not old enough to be his daughter. She had endlessly long legs, long hair; and eyelashes. And was lost at some point between the selfish animal of undefined wants and a maiden's promise. There remained dew on her pubic hairs, Leadmann explained, then went on to not explain how or what he knew. The relationship was father and daughter, but of course Leadmann fully insisted that the father should be the daughter's first lover. To the sheriff's deputies he explained this. And, later, to the judge, the jurists and his eventual cellmates.

"I picked her up off the divorced wife of James E," he told anyone who would listen. And anyone would. "The girl obviously needed a devotion target—an outlet for affections, hostilities. And pure sensual experimentation. And I?" His shoulders heaved tragically. "I, alas, obliged—"

Obliged?

"I prefer the word. Naturally I was totally intrigued with her but the cost would be high. Terribly high."

Love?

"Love. I loved her double. As a daughter, as an irresistible sex object. Coldness never came any hotter. And she needed to be nudged, touched, squeezed, pounded, rubbed. Back to the womb. We both wanted to go back together, although of course only I knew it."

And besides, in Leadmann's law there existed no difference between altruistic love and carnal love. "Only the difference that civilization has written into it. Why?"

"Why," I said, I said, "why?"

"To protect the weak! To protect mothers! To justify the whole unbalanced civilization we've engineered up from our basic ineffectuality and held together with scotch tape." His hand swung at a fly, though not with intended violence. "Why! Do you want to know why?"

No, I said, you've just told me.



"No—those are but legal excuses! The real reason is worse. We need hate objects. Scapegoats. We've got to have official things to be moral about so we can gorge our hostilities. It's too much trouble to get moral about cheating, selfishness, procrastination, turning backs on people that have been wronged. Oh, no! That hurts! Easier to be righteously angry over a peeping Tom, a hit and run driver, a man who mistreats his dog, or some lucky sonofabitch who beats his wife. Or—"

"Or? Or."

"Or some lucky sonofabitch who's sleeping with his daughters, one, two, three—" He pulled an inch-long cigarette butt from his shirt and lighted it. "'For hell's sake,' all the fathers said, 'that bird's having all the fun and we're afraid to. He needs sock in jaw!'"

No such thing as platonic, fatherly love for a father's daughters?

"But certainly! All I said was that it is double love. Both."

That had been then but here it was now. Alongside. The pond. The demonstration? Had scarcely begun.

He, Leadmann, lay in greenish water, blowing absurd little bubbles, remindful more of a stranded whale than the classified man. Ghia, this same girl, stood to one side radiating an explanation. Like so many of his champions, discoverers, disciples. She assumed that an interpreter was called for. You needed a guide to explore the Leadmann country. She caught my attention and nodded significantly at the soiled bilge and cried,

Germs!

"All right—germs."

"It is how he keeps healthy. By fouling himself head to toe. Periodically."

Builds up an immunity—

"But of course! Protect yourself from bugs, you lose your defense. Same energy that goes into putting screens on houses or insecticides? Well. Should be stored inside the person to make him immune. Simple?"

Too simple.

"I mean—" Leadmann nibbled on a tendril of moss that floated

before his thick lips. "I mean. Mental directive—you have got to order yourself to kill your own germs. Psyche gets lazy—wants chemists to do job."

"You don't agree?"

The girl, Ghia, had put aside her love-look and brought forth hostile eyes so that we could converse. She told it to me. Any fool. Should know? You can't possibly protect yourself from all germs—all! All!

"And the great man? The impersonalized man?" I followed her around, from toes to head, imagining myself in and out of her and paying the terrible high cost. My hand was burning from the scorch of her hot, tan slopes which fell away before the stench of jail sentences. And there came the urgent voice of a libido, crying out that it was a bargain in any case.

She said, "The personalized man makes an effort. To regularly contact all germs. Vaccinates himself. By exposure."

Phrases. Worn ungracefully by one too young, too honest, too animal to be articulate. But she had a great memory for dogma. Some of Leadmann's lines had gotten through, and sat hard within her casual brain, and she knew when to turn them on. But not off; a parrot performing long after the last peanut. Ghia's mother? Had come unscrewed from the lap of a fabric executive before the advent of Levis. On girls. With or without the bottom for it. Had married an Arab who was far up in the IBM world. ("sent over here to study by an oil maggot") and then the Arab came down, and moved once more among his people. Leadmann had uncovered her daughter in the city dump during one of his archaeology expeditions. And she? Was there on speculation. Gathering material for an essay on U.S. folkways. What did people discard? Were there waves of throwing away this or that? Ceramic tigers? Aluminum coffee pots? Houndstooth sport coats? Surplus chrome from surplus automobiles?

Oh, the daughter! Oh, Ghia!

After got to know mother. Knew daughter. Stonefaced. Demure. Flat—

"Flat?" You had asked, and bitten into a filet of shark lovingly prepared by the host. Leadmann.



"Oh, absolute! A creature without responses. The kind of animal that television producers take aim at and fire. Shock. Impact. Violence. Shouts. You had to caricature—go way beyond reality to provoke animation out of her. Before the rescue, she spent long hours by the screen, drinking in long cowboys, greasy gangsters. And. And horrible monsters. But detached of course. Her lower lip hanging down—powerless to move it up into position. She was like most teenagers. Shockproof! Nothing there to frighten because they weren't alive enough to fear death—"

That was a pretty big statement somebody said.

But true, he insisted. More and more of them nowadays—picturesque animals raised mathematically. Reacting mechanically. Is this human? The trouble; their parents didn't give them anything except everything—the car, horse lessons, trips to camp, boats, expensive parties. No. They never pulled back the skin and inserted civilization. They never! Pried underneath and pricked them with reason. No scope. No horizons except louder guns, bigger cowboys, faster autos, finer clothes, quieter refrigerators, flatter wristwatches—

Have you about finished, they wanted to know.

"You have got to show them around. Show them. Everything. Why? How? Who? What for? Reasoning. On their level first, then show why it won't work on yours."

Ever had any children, they asked again.

"Nobody can prove nothing," he said, and his jowls fluttered madly in the negative. And he tightened the belt around his bulging trousers. He was not a good man for trousers, better, somehow, with them off. Tailors found it difficult to be cordial when he exploded inside a suitery, looking in all probability, for a cheap shirt.

I return to Ghia's mother. I'd rather return to Ghia but cannot, having never been there.

The Arab had packed his tent and moved on to the wastes, destined to be spoiled by oil. The mother had immediately gone deep into ceramics, mosaics and occasional painting. Recognition. And from there, courses, colleges. And from college a descent into archaeology which terminated in the civic dump on which



she'd undertaken to do a paper. "Radios!" she had declaimed to Leadmann, "always blind radios—sometimes just the gutless cabinets."

"People just trade away," he said. "They tire of the old and want the new, the very new. Or else, the very old—"

"Antiques," she agreed contemptuously. "I myself—"

"Hah!"

Interjecting, Leadmann was, forevermore. When his own words couldn't be forced into the slots between another man's teeth he could always stand on his head, or do push-ups, or leap atop a table. Or crawl, writhe roomwise on his belly. Or lie. On his back, gasping—

"Or any of thousands of disruptions," she could tell you. And probably would. Definitely, now that he had discovered the daughter who needed hero-objects.

But, Ghia. She fell away whenever he chose to make an insert. To have continued talking would be conversational masochism; loftiest semanticists were drowned in the silence of his pantomime. Ghia hung around. A member of a long line of subservient animals, catching his bait with coyote's amorality, tolerating competitors who might be other women, other men, birds, bugs, lampshades, tidepools, anything. "I'd be contented with his left-over parts," Ghia's mother conceded, "even his echo is noisy." He had, they said, broken relations with absolutely everything.

"Psychoanalysis? Everybody should but."

The Impersonalized man shuddered; horrification had seized control of the stockholders, starting at the feet, then burning rapidly upwards until his face was afire. His eyes threw themselves wildly at the countryside; seeking. They caught and held a 1958 Oldsmobile hardtop coupe which appeared to glide like a gleaming Chrysler through the hayfields. Ghia. Refused to look, preferring an adjacent beer can on which somebody had placed a rock. And then Leadmann allowed his automobile to cool. And then he told about it. His Personalized Documentary Film Project. And it was like this:

Girl's face? Oval with a slit and two holes.

Nothing more. This was enough if face told remainder of body. But.

Anyone shouldn't spend money for psychoanalysis.

For five hundred. He could—dollars—do them. With movie camera. Include sounds. Documentary—

Hidden cameras. Goes on for days, in groups. You never knew when. The camera was shooting. Pictures!

Taken? Under many circumstances. Drunk. Laughter. Sober. Argumentative. Sullen. Gay. Witnessing pornography? Surprise! *Repugnance*—

He pronounced that word with absolute dedication.

"And blah!" he shrieked, almost. "Guard down. Apathetic, dull, stupid, disenchanted, homely, ugly." This. You had to fight all the time. People's blandom. "Creeping in, it keeps," he warned Ghia, "like staring at a housing project."

But getting on with it. Beside a larva infested pond, and the man skimming the scum while unbelieving birds sewed up the thickets overhead to chirp disconsolate news; while redwings clanged in the reeds and frogs plopped, and mud stank—and farther west, the great honk of the city under an umbrella of defense planes. And to the south, forests moving toward the sea, and the ocean coming back, shuttling off shoreline sand; a wily plan, part of its attack on the North American continent. And. Three of us—one for the front, one for the rear. Protected from society by the stink of moldering marshes. This was ours, the girl, his. The desire; mine. The imagined sleep—mine. The legs, hers, and browner than hell and stabbing me repeatedly with their confounded thrust of refracted sex; all of her a package of Right; the face, her smile, the eye that said yes without thinking and the law that said not. You? Cried hard inside for her. The fusing was ordained, mandatory. All of her was a must. "I love you inside out," I told her silently but my ache was no pain of hers. Did she know? Would I get through? She was home—the end of the journey; end of story.

I said, "A hundred million people could get in front of me but they're all in the way! It's only but you. The rest. Are dead. . . ."



And she didn't hear me again. Could relay the message only with electricity. Even the look was illegal. No voice, no eyes, no touch. Only the thin hope that something of my voltage would cross the three feet of murky air and tell her. What? Why, that I . . .

"Presto!" Leadmann said.

About the moving pictures plan. Show shots. Of people. Watching big man, small, fat, odd. Watching amputee, murder, sex! Animals, yes. Then—

"Presto!"

He took your picture by cracking his knuckles.

"On the *screen*? This is *you*?" He was breathing ferociously into your face while shouting. Now, turning off the air he came forth as a small, serene series of whispers. "So you learn about you. Mirroring self in eyes of others—not same thing! Mirroring self with analyst neither! Self-examination? No. But there on screen, not acting. This is you. How you—look! Learn about inside by seeing the outside."

I loved her inside out. Wanted the hot melt of love's vicelike grip.

"Mirrors?"

Ghia. She said. It.

Mirrors! He pronounced the word as though it was handwriting on men's room walls. No—

How could one see oneself in a mirror—guarded, preened, always face to face.

I asked, what happened to the project; expensive.

Besides, afraid are people. O, and all had small seepages of desire to see selves on screen, yes, you know, and O, he might turn out to have it. Have it. Have it! Have it? After what passed on TV. After what passed in movies. But one wanted also. Flattering light. Make-up. Stages scenes. Potent dialogue. Props? And how many, willing to chance naturalism? A man might come off a pig, a woman, an embarrassing object—ridicule. But.

"But then you join AA you have. Got to. Pay humility's costly. Installments—"



"What's AA got to do with it?"

Ghia—nibbling a twig, like he told her.

"O, everything. Has its price. Analysis—same thing. Cringing, but vomiting up the dirt to get purged, it's like vomiting in front of a lady old enough to be your daughter—"

He had chugged wildly to a stop. But had run over the switch, lay there, derailed. Ghia did a funny frown and splattered, choking your embarrassment all round and I got a bug to examine. The moon's end had caught us; you could bob for apples on an afternoon gold as urine, but to pin the tail onto the ass's posterior was a sadist's game for masochists. Why this comes to the fore, I could not know just then. Ghia was all feet and hands, grown into the size of no-man's land and she wanted to go backwards in order to be gone. But—

What? Was the man, like? Somebody asked, and I said, different.

"Everybody is different than everybody," they answered.

"But they don't know it," another said, "always."

"Not want to," said still another.

"Are *afraid* to," another suggested.

"Differentness," another warned, "is disturbing, dangerous."

"Sameness is safer," another of the other agreed.

"People try to be like other people," they told one another.

"Why can't you just be like the rest of us here," another asked the other.

"If it's good enough for the majority," the other asked another, "why can't you fly right?"

"If you're wearing sandals you'd better not show up in a 1958 Buick," another threatened.

"When you visit Rome, do as do. The tourists." (Others suggested to still others.) And the others? Nodded—in agreement? Smoking in unison, exhaling simultaneously, then lifting their drinking glasses in a single motion. And then adjusting their like neckties, they walked to their identical cars and headed for their look-alike homes and their pattern wives.

But Leadmann?

That is all for now. For Leadmann. Society is waiting for him. He'll need waiting for, watching. Will be watched. Leadmann, out of step, getting ready to trip over a hidden legal clause. Going around affronting, in all directions . . .

Leadmann will be:

turned in  
arrested  
indicted  
convicted  
sentenced

But they will never. Be able to incarcerate all of him, he is anybody, anywhere, any time.







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